

play

2002

Year in Review

45 Pages of the Year's Best

Primal

Adventure evolved from the creators of MediEvil

15 developer diaries chronicle the game's creation in our most extensive cover feature ever



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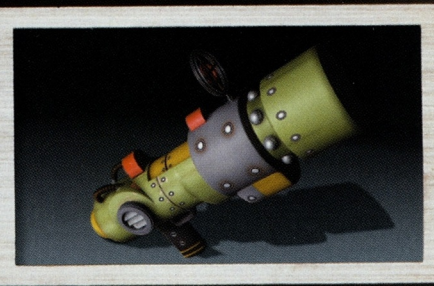


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R.Y.N.O.

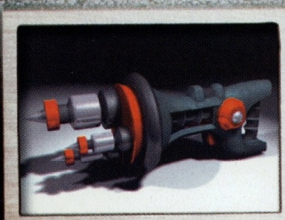
IT STANDS FOR RIP YOU A NEW ONE.
GET IT?



DEVASTATOR

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ONE GIANT STEP BACK



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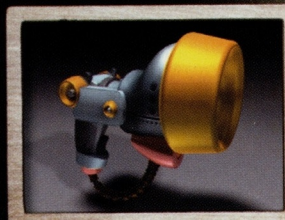
BLASTER

IT'S RAINING BULLETS AND SOMEONE
FORGOT HIS UMBRELLA.



TESLA CLAW

LET'S JUST SAY THE RESULTS
ARE NOT PRETTY.



MORPH-O-RAY

DID SOMEBODY
ORDER CHICKEN?



TAUNTER

"YOUR MOMMA IS SOOOO FAT,
NO, REALLY, SHE IS."
SEE? TAUNTING IS FUN.

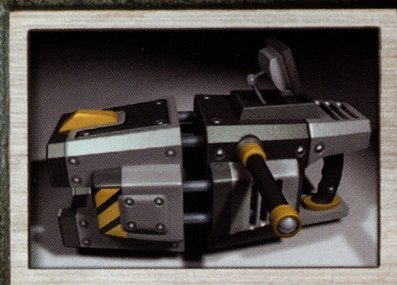


WALLOPER

KNOCK YOUR ENEMIES
INTO NEXT WEEK.



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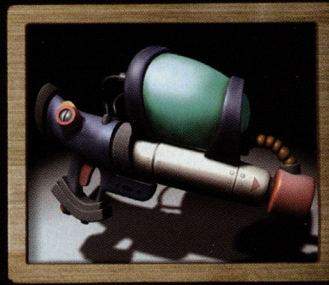
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PlayStation 2



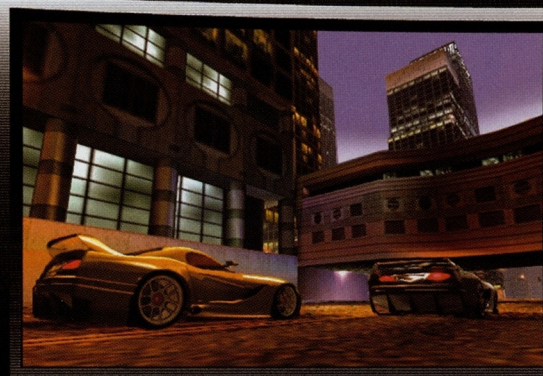
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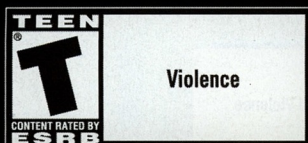
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- PSM DECEMBER 2002



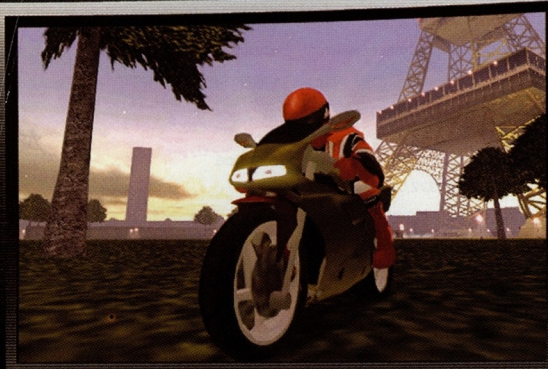
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ACHIEVING THE IMPROBABLE

Nintendo certainly closed the show in 2002—no doubt about it. A double shot of Metroid on the heels of Mario Sunshine with PSO and a slew of AAA Game Boy Advance games in between, they capped the year that would see Microsoft rise and Sony stay the course as fearless leader, leading the pack in (among other categories) sports and, once again, role playing, a crown once fitted exclusively for Nintendo.

But what of 2003? As profound a year 2002 was, '03 looks to be even more revolutionary as each of the power trio prepares to unleash the next wave in their blueprint for console supremacy. Microsoft, riding high with the most powerful machine, a new low price, broadband connectivity, first-party RPGs and platformers aplenty, and a little 800 lb. gorilla by the name of Halo 2, will look to close the gap on Sony and pull away from the 'Cube. But don't underestimate the power of Link and Nintendo's first-half, first-party triple play of Zelda, Wario World, and F-Zero, followed by Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles and a huge surprise in the fall. Sony will start the year big as well, with War of the Monsters, The Getaway, and Primal, a triple threat of their own; all three players seem to have their first-party guns loaded. The difference in '03 may come down to third-party support, and early on, with Star Ocean, Xenosaga, Devil May Cry 2, Breath of Fire V, Silent Hill 2, and Zone of the Enders: the 2nd Runner, the PS2 is looking hard to beat. Nintendo's Capcom exclusives like Viewtiful Joe will help keep them in the race, as will Microsoft's first-half third-party blitzkrieg, but ultimately this race will boil down to a duel at this year's E3, when the eyes of the world will be fixed on gaming like never before.

Regardless of who "wins," the stage is set for an epic battle in which we are all the victors. Competition on this level breeds the very best games, and given the hardware on tap, I'd say we're in for another remarkable 12 months.

On that note, I'll leave you to this year's Year in Review issue. Next month we'll have our Readers' Choice Awards and the Anime Year in Review, so the fun's just beginning.



dave halverson
editor-in-chief
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"Competition on this level breeds the very best games, and I'd say we're in for another remarkable 12 months."

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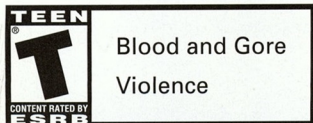
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CAN BARELY CONTAIN THEM.



Xenosaga[™]

EPISODE I

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PlayStation[®]2



COVER STORY
PRIMAL
022

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play magazine volume two issue two

2002 YEAR IN REVIEW

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When one LEGEND FALLS, another must rise.

LUNAR

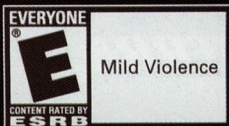
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playback

Whether you have questions, criticisms—or if you just want to vent—e-mail us at letters@play-magazine.com

Write us the old fashioned way:
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RENDERMAN

I just got the January issue, and I love how you guys are bringing more illustrations into your page layouts, and are upholding high standards for the visual design of **play**. As a 3D modeler/animator, your magazine is a great asset to me in terms of keeping up with a state of the industry. With **play**, there's no need to assault my eyes with the horrific page designs of other game mags.

Anyway, here are a couple of renders for you. I don't know if you have entertained the idea of printing 3D work from your readers, but if you wanted to have a little spot illustration of a 3D girl in a **play** t-shirt or something, I would be up for it.

Anyway, thanks for continuing to produce such a great magazine! I'm really looking forward to the future of this great industry!

Sincerely,
Noah Brewer

Look for Noah's amazing play Girl in an upcoming issue. In the meantime check out the cool 3D babe he's referring to above. You'll be seeing a lot more from Noah in future issues of play.

SEGA FAN

I am a huge fan of Sega arcade games. Ever since Model 2 and 3, I have been a devout follower. Saturn played host to a great number of Model 2 conversions. DC did not receive the Model 3 conversions it

should have. Why? I read that it maybe was a Sega management decision, perhaps not to showcase titles that couldn't be converted perfectly for the DC since Sega took some bad press for the lack of 100% conversions from Model 1&2 to Saturn.

I thought this was strange, since Gamers' Republic published an article that stated Sega was touting a prototype DC system to court developers, showcasing a flawless Scudrace/SuperGT. I would pay high dollars to have purchased that game!!!

Fast forward to 2002. PS2, GCN, Xbox; polygon power and textures galore as a result of high speed CPUs, GPUs, and RAM. Nearly any of these systems could play host to perfect conversions of Model 3, Naomi 1 & 2, and Hikaru arcade games Sega never brought home. Among them are: Scudrace/SuperGT, Daytona USA 2, Lost World Arcade, Star Wars Trilogy Arcade, LA Machineguns, Magical Truck Adv., Ocean Hunter, Spikeout (Spikeout Xtreme online is coming to Xbox courtesy of AV), Virtua Golf (for Virtua Tennis fans), Maze of Kings, Star Wars Episode 1 Racer, Planet Harriers, Soul Surfer, and VF4 Evo (just announced for PS2)

These games would get any loyal Sega fan's blue blood boiling: Outrigger 2, Propeller Arena, Sonic Advance 3, Burning Rangers 2, NIGHTS 2 or a brand new original Sonic Team action game. Propeller Arena was a DC multiplayer online WW2-ish dog fighting airplane game that got cancelled because of 9/11. It

looked totally amazing in the preview vid.

Sega's heritage is strongly rooted in these amazing arcade titles. The graphics in these games were groundbreaking, and many of the titles still define their own genre. All of these titles run at 60fps at 640x480 without any drops at all, and feature high polygons and detailed textures; in other words, graphical tour de forces. No other developer in the world can touch the quality of these titles. The sheer technical superiority is overwhelming. My most coveted game is Scudrace/SuperGT, I have not played a racing game yet that surpasses it, save Daytona USA 2. Both games are circa 1997 and 1998, produced by AM2 and director Toshihiro Nagoshi, now at AV.

I really wish Sega would release an arcade collection mother load of these amazing titles, adapting them to online play would only strengthen the amazing offer. I e-mail AV every day asking Toshihiro Nagoshi to convert Scudrace/SuperGT and Daytona USA2 and I will keep on until I buy the arcade cabinets!!!

Scott Whitmore

But do you like Sega games? We're forwarding your inquiries to Sega to get you the down low on your wish list, but it seems like they may be shedding most of their old skin, and franchises, in lieu of creating the next generation of Sega love. The possibility of a compilation disc, however, especially one with Scud Race and Daytona USA 2 together seems, a no-brainer, especially with the Collections line underway. As for Yuji Naka and company, if they're not working on another NIGHTS project, we'd be shocked. Sega is very aware of the game's appeal and has eluded to it continuing. Sonic, on the other hand, I think everyone will agree, needs some maintenance. Sonic is one of the few 2D games that didn't translate so well to a 3D universe. Another 2D Sonic, say on Xbox, would be huge. Our Sega rep is super tight lipped about 03, but if the rumblings we're hearing are any indication, your love for Sega will only continue to grow...

GETTING INTO IT

I'm an educated over-30s female gamer. Is my demographic smaller than that of the dodo? Maybe, maybe not. But my household disposable income is 16 times higher than that of the average US teenager (yes, I looked it up). I own every console on the market (except for the Xbox, because I dislike Microsoft). I finish about ten games a year, which I buy - not rent or borrow. Our DVD expenditure doesn't quite rival the GDP of a small country but is nevertheless substantial. Our game and home theatre gear overflow from a 6ft rack. If not **play**, what magazine is for me?

I rarely buy a game without a good review in **play** - and I have rarely regretted it (except for Super Mario Sunshine - a 10? Puh-leeze). As somebody who watches anime but is not a hardcore fan, your reviews are my only buying guide and a definite selling point for your magazine. After Gamers' Republic died and before I found **play** I did not subscribe to another media magazine - as you pointed out it is quite easy to get information online without paying to wade through games "journalism" along the lines of "Dudes!! This game ROCKS and has BIG BOOBS".

In short - thanks for **play**, and please don't change for the worse.

Aloha,
Frossie

We're shocked at how much mail we're receiving from female gamers. It's like before play there wasn't a magazine a woman could bring herself to pick up, so we're incredibly thankful for the props. I guess being into games for so long has turned us into sensitive guys, at least when we're not around each other, acting like complete morons. Anime is wonderful because it's universal; guy, girl, anyone that appreciates art can get into most of today's better anime. FLCL has me in its grasp these days along with Hellsing and Arjuna, which is beyond special. Our own gamer girl Chris Alexander helps keep our feet on the ground too, so she's partially to thank. Next time we get to Hawaii we're throwing you a play party on us!



GAVE PEACE A CHANCE.

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The cross-over continues...



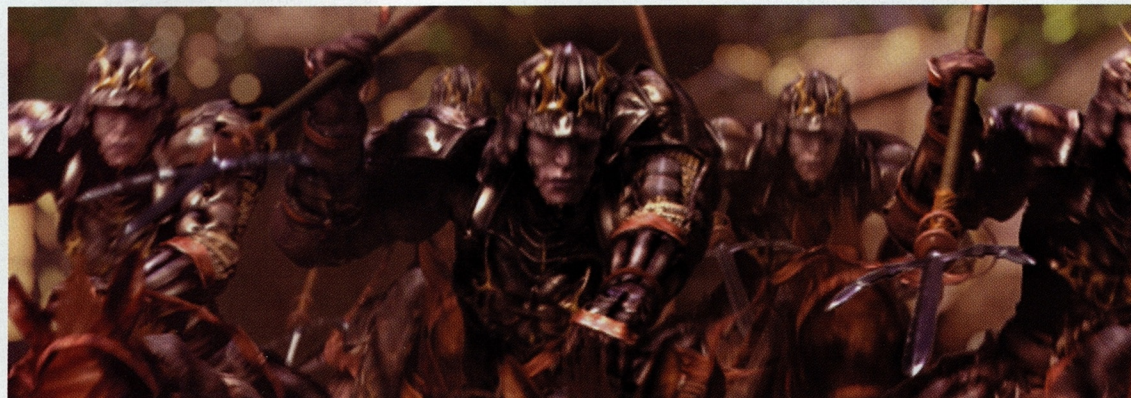
In the ever-burgeoning world of video-game movie news, Capcom's samurai epic *Onimusha* will be following *Resident Evil* as their next game to make the move to the big screen under producer Samuel Hadida. The same distributor, Giga, is on-board as well. *Onimusha* has sold well over 4 million copies worldwide and most recently won our award for best CG of 2002. If we had our druthers they'd just continue on with the CG, but that doesn't seem likely. So here's our casting call; Billy Crudup and Lucy Liu...beat that. *Resident Evil* did well for itself worldwide: in Japan it led the box office for three

weeks in 2002 raking in an additional 20.7 million over the healthy US take and swift DVD sales. *Onimusha* however, with its authentic Samurai backbone, will be a more difficult task.

Meanwhile, anime fans had their cake, ate it, and now the masters are baking more.... three films of great magnitude are on the way: Miyazaki is back to the drawing board working on his next film, following the captivating *Spirited Away*, which is due out on DVD this Spring. It's called *Howl's Moving Castle*, and is based on a children's novel by Diana Wynne Jones, about a girl changed by a wizard

into an old woman. The film is set to hit screens in Summer 2004. Before that, 2003 will bring the first feature film from *Akira* director Katsuhiro Otomo since... *Akira* (!) way back in 1988! So far all we know is that it takes in England during the Industrial Revolution. And finally Mamoru Oshii's (*Ghost in the Shell*) *Innocence* is set hit to hit theaters in Spring 2004.

"Onimusha has sold well over 4 million copies worldwide and most recently won our award for best CG of 2002."



NINTENDO IN 2003

For those unsure of how Nintendo will follow up their magnificent 2002, here's a peek at Nintendo of Japan's updated release list. U.S. dates should be fairly similar.



Feb. 7	Nintendo Puzzle Collection
April	Giftopia
May	F-Zero GameCube
Spring	Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles
Summer	Wario World
Summer	Mario Golf
Summer	Kirby's Airland
Winter	Mario Tennis
Winter	1080 Silver Storm
TBA	Mario Kart
TBA	Star Fox (shooter)
TBA	Pikmin 2
TBA	Animal Crossing 2

FINAL FANTASY 12



Square recently released this image in Japan, giving the world a first look at the incredible art style that can be expected from *Final Fantasy 12*. With a game staff that includes members from *Final Fantasy VII*, *Vagrant Story*, and *Final Fantasy IX*, expect a brilliant game.

THE ANIME NETWORK COMETH

New video-on-demand anime service hits the airwaves

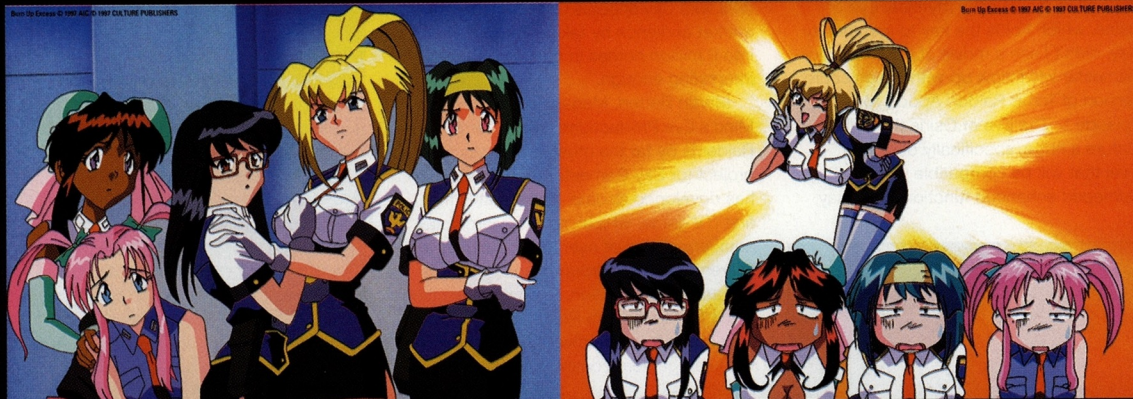
Details are finally coming in surrounding the details of ADV Films new Anime Network, which is actually more of an on-demand catalog. The network will go on the air in a series of stepped-up phases, with Phase One hitting the airwaves in

mid-December as part of Comcast Cable's video-on-demand (VOD) in the Philadelphia area. VOD delivers programs directly to viewers, at their request, 24-7. If size counts, The Anime Network has a ways to go, (the VOD service is available to 1.2

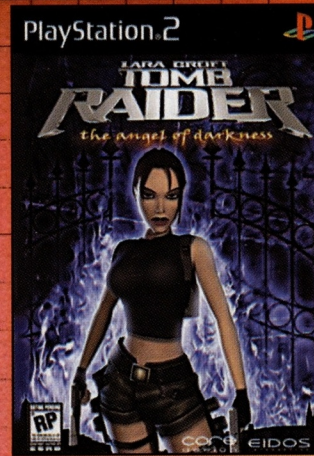
million consumers in the Philly zone) but it's a start. At the very least, the possibility of content like *Spriggen* and *Evangelion* being available on demand nationwide is an exciting one. ADV Films main man John Ledford: "For our audience, a video-on-

demand-based launch is quite perfect," Ledford continued. "Anime fans are really the ultimate early-adopters—they're very tech savvy, and will be quick to appreciate the benefits of on-demand functionality."

The Network model is structured around four content areas: Action, Sci-Fi, Comedy, and Martial Arts and will include approximately 25 hours of available content, at the mid December launch, including both feature films and episodes from series. Titles will include *Spriggen*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Excel Saga*, *Martian Successor Nadesico*, *Gasaraki*, *Noir*, *Dai-Guard*, *Bubblegum Crisis Tokyo 2040*, *Orphen*, *Golden Boy*, *Sorcerer Hunters*, *Kimera*, *Ninja Resurrection*, *Tekken*, *Those Who Hunt Elves*, *Gunsmith Cats*, *Burn Up W* and *Samurai X: The Motion Picture*. While a network similar to a G4 seems like a far off dream, ADV's first step will undoubtedly keep anime fans' TIVO's working overtime.



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FIRST THE BEATLES AND NOW THIS...

Lara Croft comes to a set-top-box not so near you.

In the UK apparently, they've begun feeding games directly into the home via a device resembling a set top box with a control tethered to it, somewhat like the \$5.00 an hour Mario gizmo featured in our finer fleabag motels. The first such notable game stars the world's most famous videogame character – Lara Croft, who recently made her interactive TV debut in the UK and Ireland following an exclusive agreement between BSkyB and Eidos Interactive.

Tomb Raider: Apocalypse, Episode 1: The Eye of Osiri, developed by Mind's Eye Productions specifically for Sky Gamestar – Sky Digital's TV games portal, is the first

episode in a series, with parts two and three launching throughout 2003.

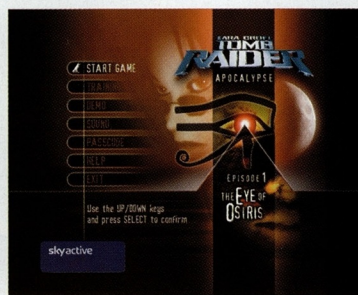
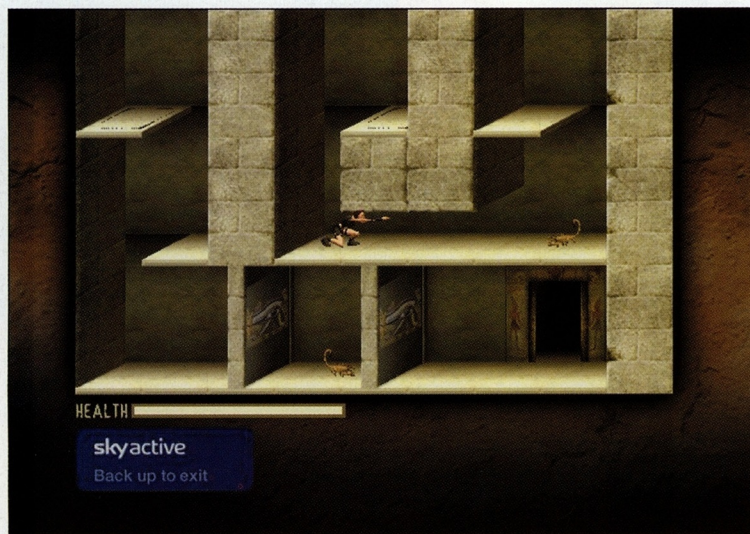
In the 2D platformer, Sky digital viewers take on the role of the Lara as she embarks on a 10 level "death-defying" adventure, guiding her royal breast-ness through ancient Egyptian temples where she has to recover the mythical Eye of Osiris, which holds the key to immortality. Hey, didn't I see a movie about that? Sky Gamestar will follow up with a high score version of Tomb Raider: Apocalypse, Episode 1: The Eye of Osiris that will feature a huge, specifically designed level that will be compatible with the Sky Gamepad enhanced functionality. Okay,

now, I'm excited.

Mark Stanger, Commercial Director of New Media at Eidos Interactive comments: "One of the main aims within Eidos' New Media division has been to look at how new technologies can add value to our existing intellectual properties. Our deal with Sky enables us to hit a mass-market audience by taking Tomb Raider into 6 million homes in one hit." Sounds interesting enough.

Martin Batten, Managing Director at Mind's Eye Productions adds: "Tomb Raider is by far the most challenging project for Sky Gamestar that Mind's Eye has developed to date. The result is the first iTV game, which creates a large play area, consisting of over 250 locations, with 3D rendered backgrounds and hundreds of frames of animation. Even more exciting is the fact that Tomb Raider is also the first ever episodic interactive TV game which will keep gamers coming back for the next installment."

So will we ever get to ride the Gamestar in this country? Hey we got the Sex Pistols didn't we?



HOLIDAY CHEER

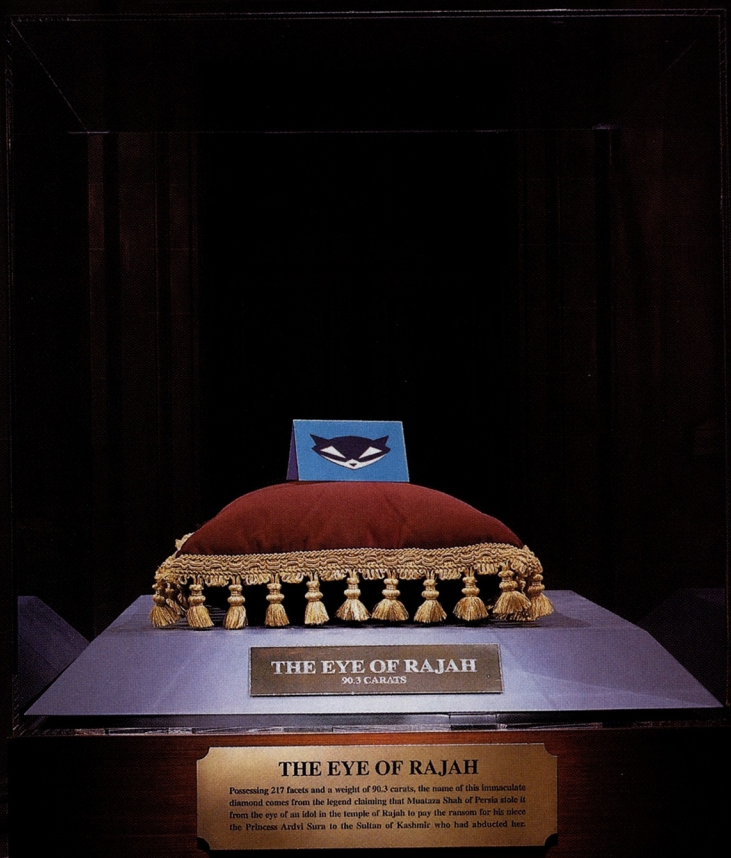
'Twas the night before Christmas (well six nights before, but who's counting), and we received this e-mail from Nintendo, which normally wouldn't be news, but we just love the way it's put. It's also worth noting that in any other year where a new Mario and Metroid were released within months of each other Nintendo would be belly laughing all the way to the vault. Regardless it's good to see a little crossfire given the amount of press we get from Microsoft and Sony...

- The first returns are in on holiday video game shopping ... and the little elf called momentum has curled up right next to Nintendo. So, while our competitors pass along their side of the story, we thought you would appreciate hearing how the month of November really shook out ...
- The November NPD report of sales data from American retailers shows that Nintendo GameCube jumped more than three full percentage points in next generation console share ... while PlayStation 2 increased two percentage points ... all at the expense of Microsoft's Xbox ... which lost five points of the market.
- Unit sales of Nintendo GameCube and Microsoft's Xbox were dead even in November (468,000 units each)—despite Microsoft giving away two free games with their hardware.
- Nintendo GameCube also showed the biggest jump in software sales, climbing more than 150 percent over October totals...compared to 97 percent for the Xbox and 48 percent for PlayStation2.
- With the smash entry of Metroid Prime, Nintendo GameCube is on track to have four new titles this year eclipse one half-million unit sales, while no new Xbox title has yet to reach that mark.
- Both Metroid Prime for Nintendo GameCube (#2) and Metroid Fusion for Game Boy Advance (#10) appeared among the top 10 sellers for all game sales in November.
- With sell-through of 1.3 million units, Game Boy Advance was as popular in November as PlayStation 2. Roughly 33 percent of all dollars spent in this industry are spent on Game Boy products.
- Nintendo held 46 percent of the total hardware share for the month of November, an increase of 11 percent over October. Sony held 42 percent (-6 percent), while Microsoft held only 12 percent (-5 percent).



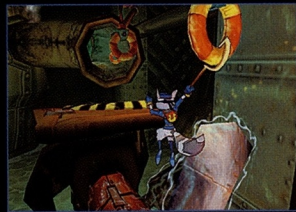


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Mild Violence

PlayStation 2

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ALONE IN THE DARK, JUST LIKE IT WAS ON DREAMCAST

Well, it's gotta be better than *The House of the Dead*!

Infogrames, Inc., has announced a deal that will take its horror classic *Alone in the Dark* from the computer screen to the big screen. Infogrames has the theatrical feature film rights to the game, which "created and spawned the survival-horror gaming genre that exists today," to quote Boll Kino who will control exclusive worldwide theatrical film rights to *Alone in the Dark*, as well as video, DVD, television, cable and pay-per-view rights for the film. Infogrames will retain all other rights to the franchise, including rights for series on free television and cable. Principal photography for the

film is currently scheduled to commence in Vancouver in the spring of 2003, with Dr. Uwe Boll (*House of the Dead*, *Blackwoods*, *Sanctimony*, *Heart of America*) serving as director and producer.

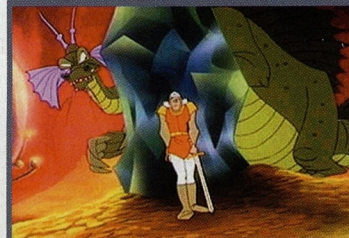
Unbelievably, *Alone in the Dark* has sold several million units worldwide since its introduction in 1992. If you need convincing dust off the Dreamcast and enjoy one of the best horror games never played, the ill-faded *Alone in the Dark: The New Nightmare*.

"Today we're seeing collaboration between Hollywood and the gaming

universe at levels never experienced before. While the trend has largely focused on licensing Hollywood franchises for games, certain gaming franchises possess all the qualities required for a successful motion picture, and *Alone in the Dark* is clearly one such property," said Bruno Bonnell, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Infogrames, Inc. "*Alone in the Dark* has captivated gamers for more than a decade and we're thrilled that an entirely new audience will now be able to experience its suspenseful story on the big screen." Yeah, okay, but has he seen *House of the Dead*?

DRAGON'S LAIR COMIC BOOK SERIES SLATED FOR 2003

Keepers of Dirk and all things Dragon's Lair, Dragon's Lair LLC, in association with MV Creations, has signed a four year unlimited title license agreement for the creation of a new Dragon's Lair comic book series and related merchandise. The comic books will feature the adventures of Dirk the Daring, Princess Daphne and other classic characters of the lair created by Don Bluth. Riding the recent resurgence of Dirk and his busty babe Daphne in *Dragon's Lair 3D*, the comic will allow Dirk lovers to continue their adventures long after the game ends. Since the LD coin-op's debut in 1983 the Dragon's Lair brand has grossed more than \$107 million and has been played by more than a quarter of a billion people. The original *Dragon's Lair* is one of only three arcade games on display at the Smithsonian Institution—the other two being *Pac-Man* and *Pong*. They really should complain to their arcade operator, I mean, those games are pretty old.



THE GOLDEN AGE OF WIRELESS

Nintendo-ites have their WaveBird, but what of Xbox patrons? Here are two such devices to wrap your hands around, The Lynx from MadCatz, sized like the hamburger pad that came with the initial run of Xbox, and the Eclipse from Pelican, shaped like the new S-Pad. The key features about these two pads in particular? They both work. The big Catz pad, looks like it could double as a watercraft, adorned with transparent fixtures like analog balls (hey now) and corrugated rubber grips but it's big and takes three AAs (not included) to operate. The Eclipse, on the other hand, not only adopts the compact S-design but puts the black and white buttons on the shoulders (nice move) and only takes two AAs which are generously included. Both 900mhz pads feature memory card ports in the base, variable rumble (the Mad Catz has dual vibration) and a 50 ft. range, regardless of obstructions. The Eclipse goes 100 hours with the rumble off, and 50 plus sending out good vibrations. The MadCatz doesn't say so we'll have to get back to you on that one.





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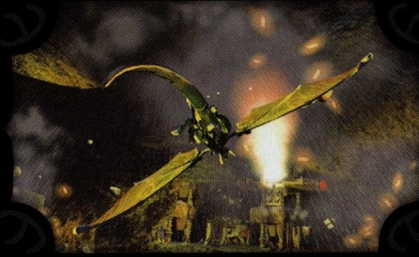
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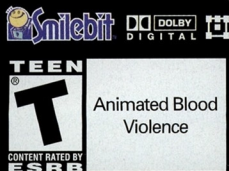


Blood and Gore
Violence

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*From the Shadows of history,
a Legend reawakens.*



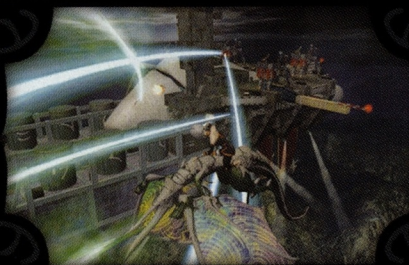


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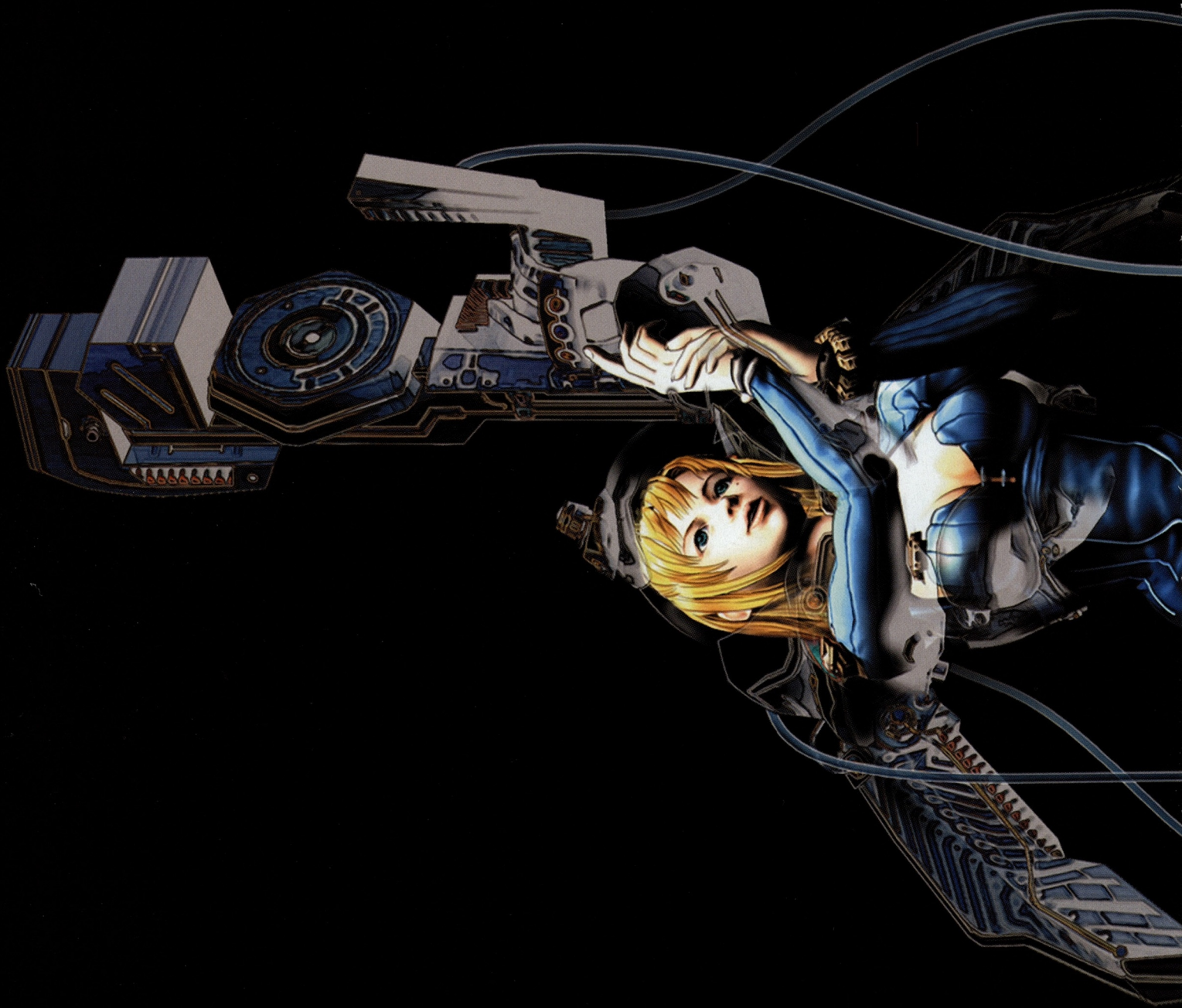


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play games





Primal

Games, as we have come to know them, are most definitely changing

words dave halverson

Somewhere in the space-time continuum exists the nexus, the converging point where the two primal forces that govern the universe are kept in accord—order and chaos. Here, fused with the apparatus, the balance of all existence flows through a being called Chronos, the living heart that filters the blood of the universe. But the lord over chaos wishes to break with eternity, and his broken rituals are rocking the foundation of the nexus and, as such, life in the known universe, including the human world, Mortalis. So who to save us? How about a female rocker, and a rock? Sounds like the blueprint for your typical adventure, does it not?

I love that Sony's Cambridge Studios didn't simply roll out Sir Dan's bones for their first PS2 offering. Not that I don't miss him, but a team this significant needs to air out between benchmarks. Not since Naughty Dog reinvented the action category have we seen anything as unique as Primal.

As Scree accompanies Jen from the flesh to the world of Oblivion, you immediately realize you've never been here in a game before. That dialogue, it's too well spoken; these models, their

mannerism and animation, they're too real, and not artificially so. Jen climbs and steps as if she has a mini-AI routine plugged into her knee socket, her entire body moves with grace and realism never seen, and she is beautiful, really beautiful, in a human way rather than a polygonal one. Don't get too used to that, though. What we humans deem pretty is foul in other realms, and soon Jen will learn to adopt their forms as she and Scree fight to restore the natural order. Scree is a living, breathing friend of Zool — a gargoyle who serves Arella, the personification of order. Scree helps Jen in many ways: as her guide he can scout ahead and clear paths, cling to stone and reach places she cannot — and he knows the locals.

The dialogue between Scree and Jen, as you'll find throughout the entire game, is, simply stated, the best the video-game industry has ever produced. You wanted an interactive adventure with the intelligence of a fantasy novel woven through it? Well, here it is. So extraordinary is Primal that I don't need to describe its gameplay, because it barely qualifies as such. You're simply in the world, reacting and adapting to it, working in tandem with



"You wanted an interactive adventure with the intelligence of a fantasy novel woven through it? Well, here it is."



Scree to make things right in a given realm. Everything that happens to them blossoms before you. There are no meters, power-ups, equip screens or a health bar. When Jen gets a weapon she sheathes it as would you or I. You know when she's cold, or scared, or wounded, or pissed off, because she says so, and not like a doll—she's hauntingly real. Positioning her face close to the camera is like a voyage of discovery. The only thing that resembles traditional videogame rules is her lock-on fighting style. These battles are of course beautifully

animated and wrought with moves, including some particularly savage ones when Jen is transformed. Other than that, the best way to describe Primal is to simply say you're there.

We've been waiting for this game since the birth of 128-bit, and now it's finally here. To celebrate, rather than attempt to convey the scope of Primal's creation, here is a very special look at exactly what goes in to creating a game of this magnitude, from the team itself. Without further ado, Cambridge Studios' team Primal:

Primal Developer Diary



primal

developer: scee cambridge studios / publisher: scea / available: january

preview

Primal

Developer Diary

Ever wanted to know what's going on behind the scenes, the many thoughts that swirl through a developer's mind when they're locked in to the creation of their game? What does it take to actually make a game? Read on to find out.



Chris Sorrell Creative Director, Primal

Responsible for overseeing creative development of the game, originating much of the concept. Involved in as much programming as time permits (I'm a programmer at heart!).

Notable past work:

- Concept originator, producer and programmer for MediEvil (PS1).
- Concept and programming contributions to MediEvil2 (PS1).

- Design, programming and graphics for the James Pond series of games (Amiga, Megadrive).
- Artwork/programming on several Amiga/ST games.

"I've now been working in the industry for twelve years—since I was seventeen."



What's the thinking behind Primal? Well, it started after MediEvil 1's completion with loose ideas of wanting to create a dark, fantasy game with an expansive, immersive world and engaging, believable characters. I wanted us to build upon everything we had learnt from MediEvil, but in a way that let us explore a different, darker direction. On the technology front we wanted to create a powerful PS2 game engine that could drive both Primal and further games from our studio. Removing limits on the size and detail level of the game world were goals we wanted to achieve...

After spending so long staring at Sir Dan's bony butt, I felt we should give the game a female lead! At the same

time I was keen that we didn't just create the usual, tired, sex-doll kind of character that we've seen so much of in games over the last few years; "sexy not sleazy" is an approach we've tried to follow. Since any game with a central girl character is instantly "copying Tomb Raider," I wanted Jen to have qualities that I was sure Lara wouldn't be demonstrating any time soon. Having her spend large parts of the game with the appearance and powers of a demon seemed to fit the bill nicely!

Although Primal's story revolves around Jen, I wanted to give the player two freely selectable main characters. This is where Scree comes in. Best described as Jen's guide and would-

be protector, Scree enables us to explore some interesting dual character gameplay dynamics. Throwing such an unlikely pairing of characters together also means we have an interesting relationship to explore, and of course they have differing, complementary abilities with which to face the game's challenges.

Of course, unlike MediEvil, Primal isn't played for laughs. This has meant that our world and characters must be that much more detailed and realistic in order to carry the events and story of the game. I knew this would be a new challenge, but I think it has surprised us all just how tough it is to create a convincing "real" world. In tackling

this we've tried to question many of the clichés and conventions of the third-person genre, banishing things like floating pickups, intrusive status displays and repetitive enemy movement patterns... It's sure easier to make a wacky platformer!

As the game is now moving into its busiest phase of development, there are around 25 people in the team. In further segments of this diary we'll try and offer an insight into the highs and lows of developing Primal. We'll focus on the different aspects of the project (programming, art, design, etc.) and some of the other guys can offer you their perspective on the making of the game. A bientot!

"I was keen that we didn't just create the usual, tired, sex-doll kind of character that we've seen so much of over the years..."



Katie Lea Lead Designer, Primal

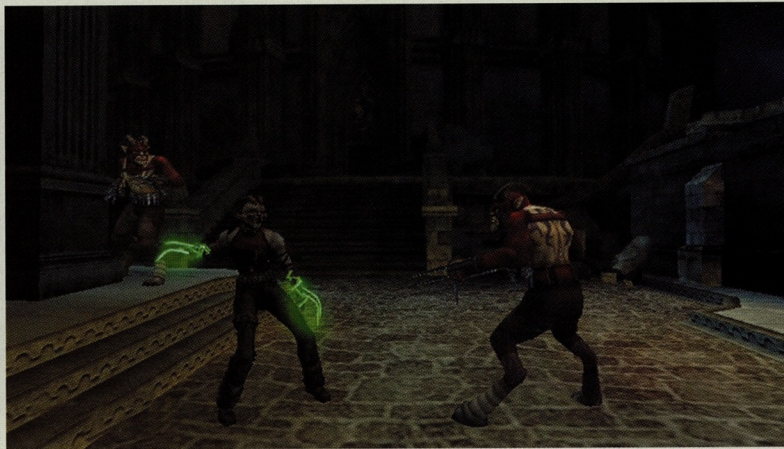
Responsible for level design, enemy design, overseeing seeing the level creation process from rough design maps through to polished final levels and helping out with mapping tasks.

Notable past work:

- Level creation on James Pond3 (Megadrive)
- Event scripting on several low-profile PC games

- Level mapper on MediEvil1 (PS1)
- Level mapper on MediEvil2 (PS1)

"I've found working in games development to be a great job; it may be stressful and hard going at times, but this is outweighed by the satisfaction of seeing your creations come to life on screen."



Right from its beginnings we've had big aims for Primal, wanting to create something that feels a little different and more original than many in its genre. Consequently this has made life quite tricky for the design team—we're making a game, but trying to avoid making it too "gamey!"

We set ourselves the goal of creating a solid, believable game world. Within this environment we want our puzzle elements to fit in as seamlessly as possible, a difficult aim to achieve. By trying to avoid incongruous block puzzles and other similarly contrived mechanics, we're hoping to create a more immersive experience. Unfortunately it's quite a

challenge trying to come up with puzzles that are totally in keeping with a realistic world.

Door and key puzzles are another staple element of most other games of this type, however, I think having too many of these starts to make the world less believable. So we've tried to be creative here... that's not to say we won't use traditional doors and keys, but we are trying to limit their use to where it's natural for them to occur. As an example of a case where we've avoided a key altogether: we have a tall tower with a window that Jen is unable to reach. Scree can climb walls, so he must get up the tower, then find and drop a rope for

Jen to ascend.

I'm possibly dwelling too much on puzzles; they're not really our primary gameplay feature, this crown should go to combat. As our main combat character, Jen acquires a new weapon with each demon form. Scree was also originally intended to fight, but as the design progressed we realised that it was Jen's cool demon forms that we wanted to play with and this we should focus on. Combat is a pretty big subject and probably best tackled in a dedicated design diary, so I won't say anymore on the topic!

Throughout we've been trying to focus on the differences between two

characters and emphasising this through Primal's gameplay. There are some really nice scenarios that pop up when having two-player characters that the player has to swap between in order to successfully navigate the environment. We've tried to give the player a great deal of freedom by allowing them to swap between the two characters as they choose, and although there are plenty of design headaches this brings, I think the benefits outweigh the downsides.

With any luck, our slightly lofty design goal to make a game that is a little more unique will be successful—but taking the leap from a paper design and into a real-time game is an interesting challenge!





Mark Gibbons Lead Artist

Responsible for creating Primal's concept art and setting—the game's visual style. I lead a team of 13 artists, directing production of the 3D graphics and working in beautiful harmony with the Creative Director, Lead Programmer and Senior Designer.

Past Achievements >

I can beat Alex, the Studio's Gaming Ninja on Galaxian...actually, Primal is my first serious venture into video-game development. Much of my career has been spent working as a traditional illustrator for the likes of Games Workshop, FASA and 2000AD. I started off in Welsh Kid's TV, however...which explains the photo...

The studio here at SCEE Cambridge has a well-deserved reputation for delivering games with outstanding visuals and one of our goals for Primal, as our debut PlayStation 2 title, was to ensure this tradition continued on Sony's formidable new console. Making the leap to PlayStation 2 development has been an exciting, challenging and occasionally dizzying experience. Artists previously used to working within very strict limitations were suddenly presented with a wide panorama of possibilities. The average Medievil level on the original PlayStation, for example, was composed of roughly 8,000 polygons. In Primal, however, it's not unusual to find a single room containing an equivalent amount of detail. Additionally, we're using a dynamic loading system which in essence means only the player's immediate environment is running in the PS2's memory. This allows us to include a level of sophistication in our landscapes, characters and special effects that would be impossible if the console had to have the entire level loaded up at once.

We wanted to apply the system's power to create convincing and realistic graphics. This has placed an emphasis on gathering good reference material for our characters and environments. We use a great deal of photographic source

material as a basis for our Daemon Realms.

For example, Solum is a Realm within Primal locked in permanent winter. Our hunt for convincing textures meant that last January we had artists charging around the Cambridgeshire countryside with digital cameras at the first hint of snow.

I'm not exactly sure where we'll find the reference photos for our Victorian Sub Aqua Art-Nouveau Filtration Plant section!

The game has a wide variety of visual styles and our artists have taken architectural inspiration from sources as diverse as Ancient Rome, 17th Century France and Islamic buildings of the Middle East. Our characters are no less an eclectic mix: Mongol tribesmen, Napoleonic hussars, Babylonian gods and sado-masochistic leather fetishists have all inspired characters in Primal.

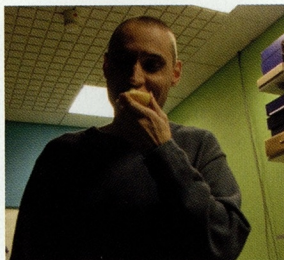
We're working hard to include special effects such as depth of field, heat haze, convincing smoke, rippling water and real-time lighting. All vital elements that gamers now expect from true Next Generation titles.

In the coming months I hope to bring you further tales of our adventures in video-game art development, including the perils of Motion Capture and the delights of Destination Alpha Modulated Multi-Texturing...



"...we had artists charging around the Cambridgeshire countryside with digital cameras at the first hint of snow."





James Busby Lead Programmer

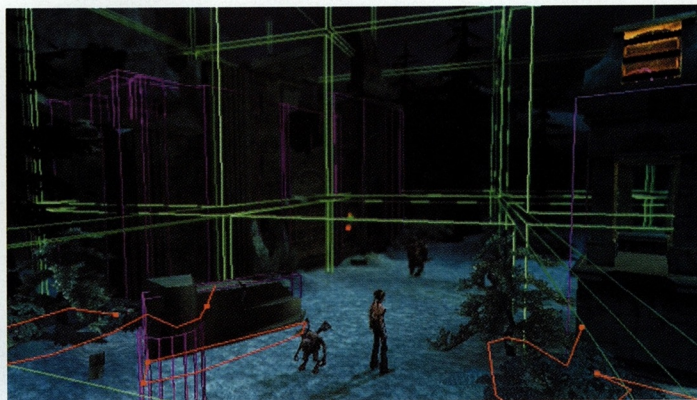
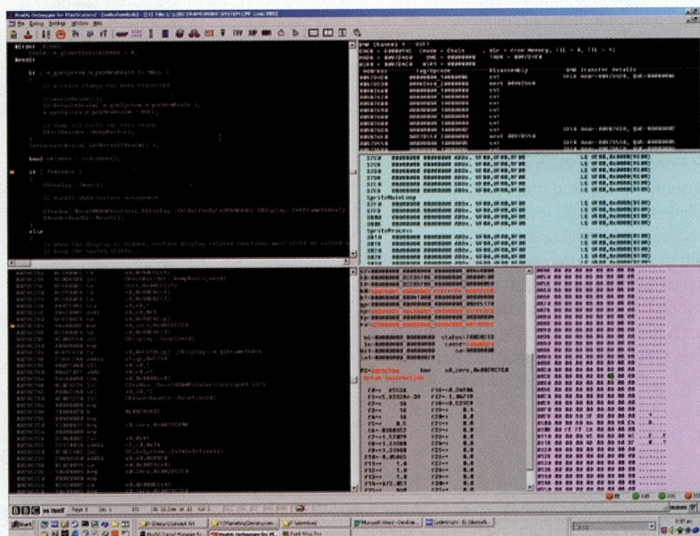
"I graduated from university with a degree in Computer Science. I wanted a job in the games industry, which isn't that easy when you have no experience, but I managed to land one with Millennium Interactive, who were a small developer/publisher in the UK. I worked on Defcon 5 and Deadline for PC, writing assembly language with no real idea what I was doing! Millennium

was bought by Sony in 1997 while I was working on MediEvil for PlayStation. I then moved onto MediEvil 2 (also PlayStation) before ending up as lead programmer on Primal—our studio's first PlayStation 2 title. When I'm not programming, I play plenty of games (especially first-person shooters and anything co-operative) and try to watch as many films as is humanly possible."

As an internal SCEE studio we are always striving to push the PlayStation platform to its limits, so the arrival of PlayStation 2 was a new challenge for us. We specialise in third-person action adventures, which are on balance one of the most complex and technically demanding game genres. With large free-roaming environments and lots of characters and animation, these games place heavy and varied demands on their engine. We had some cool technologies we had created for previous titles such as MediEvil 2 and C-12, and like other developers we had the option of porting the code from PS1, but we chose to create our next generation of engine from scratch for PlayStation 2. Why? Because we had some new ideas to try out! Ideas like portal-based rendering, skeletal animation blending, inverse kinematics, dynamic lighting and shadows, and lots more funky stuff.

The biggest challenge for the

programming team has been our just-in-time loading system. Dynamic loading is not a new idea—some developers, including ourselves, were using it for PlayStation titles. The big difference is that our new engine is able to load everything dynamically—not just the environments, but characters, textures, effects, sounds, and even scripts that drive the game flow. This frees us from almost all constraints over the amount of content we can have in our games, but at a price: it makes our life as programmers harder! We can no longer assume that any element of the game is ready for use when it is needed, be it an enemy that jumps out at you or a bridge that is needed to cross a ravine. Our engine is designed to continue running the game and wait for these things to be loaded before trying to use them. This has changed the whole way that we work but the results are worth it: we have enormous environments with incredible polygon detail but without any load time.



Alex Sulman Designer

A Chronology of Me

- September 1976: Born
- 1976 - 1981: Dribbled, cried and generally acted like a baby a lot.
- September 1982: Age six, got my first games machine (a Spectrum 48k) and my love of games began.
- 1982 - 1996: Played as many games and games machines as I could. Oh yeah, and did that school and college thing.
- 1996 - 1997: Did all that I could to get into the industry (well almost everything, there is a line you know!)
- April 1996: Got my first job in the industry as a QA tester for Sony Cambridge.

- April 1996 - 2000: Worked on Frogger, Beast Wars, MediEvil
- Was also QA Manager on MediEvil II (The Bafta award winner, I might add)
- 2000 and counting: Working as a Designer on Primal

"I work as part of the design team, offering a hardcore gamers perspective. I am involved in the initial creation and development of the gameplay for Primal. I also build most of the initial functional versions of the levels in Maya. As the game develops there is also a lot of gameplay refinement and tuning, especially with the combat that needs doing as well."

Another month, another journal, this time from team member number two of the design team. For my part, coming on to Primal was a totally new experience for me; I had always wanted to be a games designer but had been working in and running the QA testing department for some time. I was offered the opportunity to work as a designer on Primal and leapt at the chance. The project was already under way when I started and the basic framework of what the game would be was there. The substance of it, the gameplay, was still to be designed though. This has been the core of my work so far.

Initially all of my time was spent working with Katie Lea (Lead Designer), designing the levels and the gameplay for Primal. We worked systematically through the whole game, getting rough outlines for the way it would play and progress. We drew up documents with maps and summaries of events that would happen as you progressed around the levels. These designs have had a distinctly organic life—they have constantly evolved as time has gone by and as other decisions have been made.

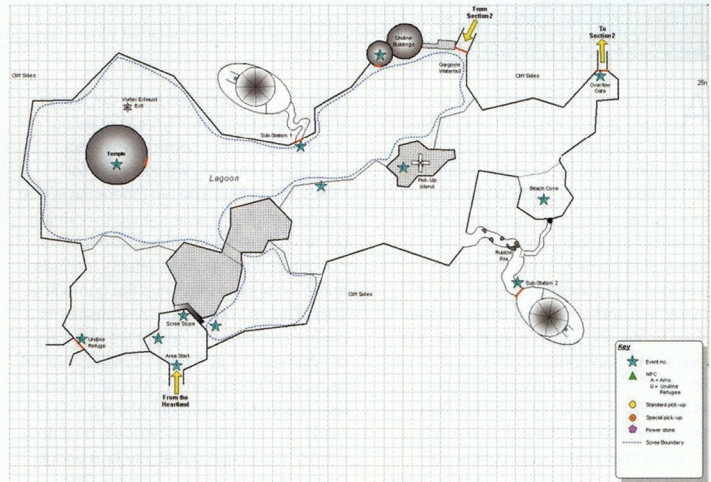
If there's one thing I've learned about the design process it's that things change! There's been many a revision, tweak and rework over the course of the game's design and I'm sure that not everything we've got now will make it into the final game. That's the only way to do it; it's impossible to design a game on paper and get it exactly right, that's why so much tweaking is essential.

As Katie touched on in her journal, the move from these initial paper designs into the 3D world of the actual game has been very interesting and, for me, extremely enlightening. When you design a level on paper it's nigh on impossible to get a sense of how long it's going to take to traverse it in-game. Yet it can have a huge impact on the way the game plays if you make the space the player actually has to cover too great. This has been particularly important on the Aquis (underwater) realm where the player gets to swim around. With the other realms, we only had to worry about the player running along the ground. When you move underwater, suddenly all of the space above and around the player is open for them to move through

and as a result you have to be extremely careful how big the level is to prevent it becoming a huge cavernous pool where it takes ages to get anywhere.

We are now at the stage where we can fully implement those elements that are needed to get the game to function

as we want them to. Although there is still some designing to do, the majority of my time has been taken up with getting our designs into playable form. The exact process of that will make interesting reading in any future design journal installment!



"If there's one thing I've learned about the design process it's that things change!"

How to kick ass in Primal

Okay, this month we thought we'd let you in on some of the mechanics that have gone into the combat system in Primal. Being a major fighting-game fan, I have been heavily involved in the creation and fine tuning of the combat system and so it made sense for me to write this diary instalment.

Combat is an important part of Primal, accounting for at least 50 percent of the gameplay. We have

therefore spent a considerable amount of time trying to create a satisfying, deep and yet easy-to-play system. Initially we looked at a few of the classic fighting games to get an idea of what would and wouldn't work for us. Primal obviously isn't a fighting game like Tekken or Dead or Alive 2. It is more akin to the classic scrolling beat-em-ups of old but in a fully free-roaming environment. This genre has not transferred to the 3D

world of polygons particularly well to date, but the previous attempts have either suffered from a dramatic lack of variety in enemies and moves or very little in the way of exploration. Primal is different in that it blends a lot of the depth and intricacies of a standard one-on-one fighting game with the adventuring and variety of a third-person action adventure game.

The combat uses a simple lock-on feature. When the player approaches an enemy, they can press a context button to "attach." Movement is then altered so that it becomes relative to the enemy, allowing the player to move towards, away from and around them. This lock can easily be toggled between enemies to allow the player to target new attackers. This is a big feature of the combat; the player won't be facing just one lone enemy after another. Often, Jen will be completely surrounded by enemies who will be switching in and out attempting to kill her.

The player has a range of attacks available to them. There are two basic attack buttons for left and right, which are pressure sensitive to allow the player to easily

trigger weak or strong attacks. There are also super moves that can be triggered by pressing both attack buttons. All moves can be joined together to form combos. These are completely customisable so that any move can be followed by any other move, giving the player a number of ways to deal with an enemy. The player can also taunt an enemy to try and encourage them to attack. Some enemies will respond to this by becoming more aggressive and rash. The player can also block and, if timed correctly, parry incoming blows, which are followed by a devastating counter attack.

There are also distinctly different types of enemy. Some are aggressive and savage, trying to overwhelm the player with the sheer volume of attacks. Others are more cagey and reserved, forcing the player to move in, in order to kill them.

All of this without mentioning the fact that each of Jen's four different forms have different weapons to tie in with each realm. Jen's Ferai form fights with razor-sharp energy claws whereas her Djinn form fights with a large two-handed sword that can be freely split into two smaller one-handed swords. So each form brings a new fighting dynamic and way to approach the enemies.





Jason Riley Senior Artist, FMV Artist

"Originally qualified as an Illustrator, but then I was seduced to working in games in 1993. I've worked on Diggers, Extractors, James Pond, Silverload, and Creatures. Which spelled the end of my 2D days, because I found 3D! I was given a chance to work on the FMV for MediEvil 1 & 2 and

Speed Freaks. As we all know, FMV doesn't make the game and is very expensive to produce. I was eventually lured to real time graphics, mainly thanks to the power of the PS2 and Primal. I love racing and flying games. Especially GT3 and Rogue Squadron."

Like all challenges, creating artwork on the PlayStation 2 takes a lot of preparation and experimentation, otherwise you jump forward and realise technical consequences too late. On top of this we have to consider thoughts of layering wicked effects, like depth of field, water caustic effects, reflections, refractions and glows, which all add to the time it takes the PS2 to draw the game on screen. The PS2 is a genius piece of electronics design with three graphics processors all working together in harmony to create these effects in a frame

(60 frames per second). There were strict limitations on our texture sizes, allowing us to add more cool effects later. Textures were all "mip-mapped," which meant the textures got smaller in memory size, the further away from the camera they go.

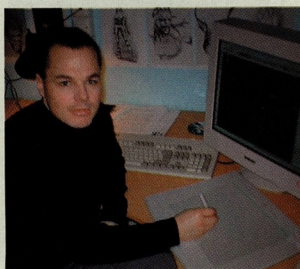
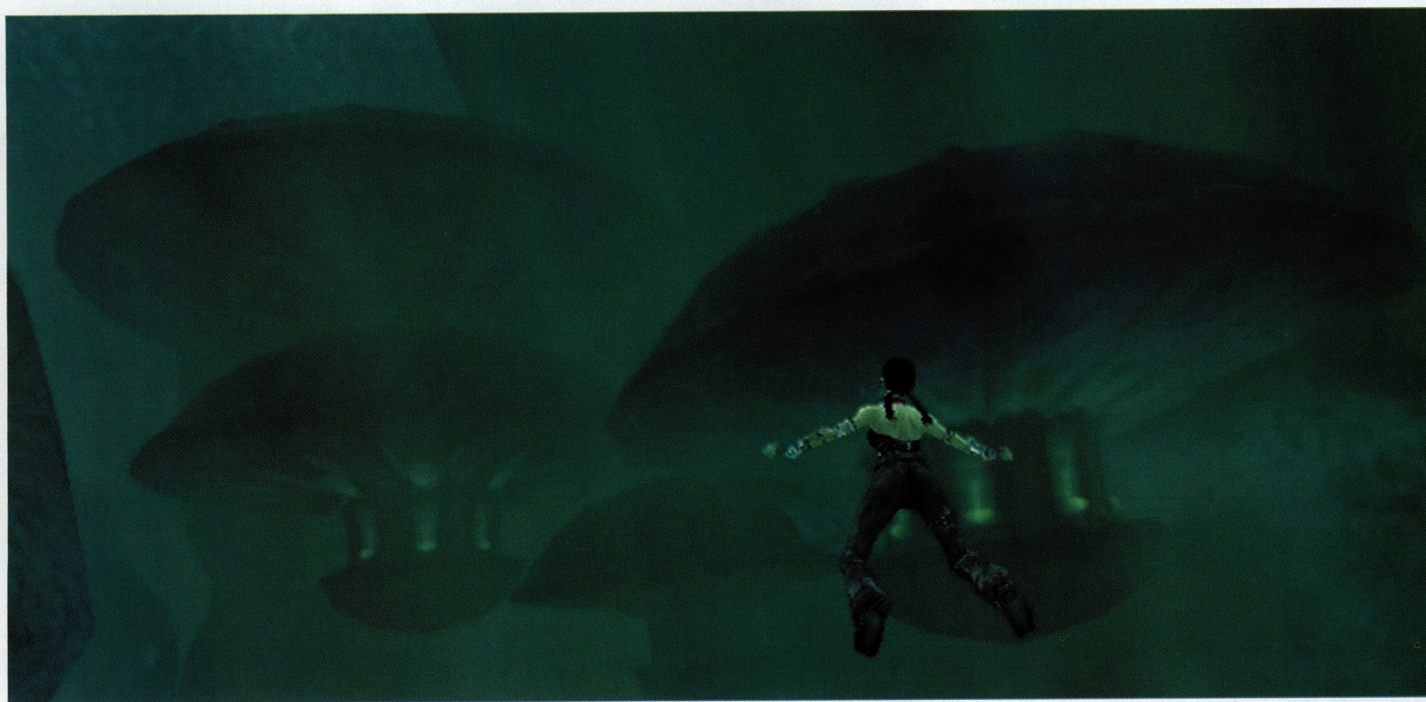
At first we get a very rough, blocked-out version of a map, that has been modelled and tested by our Game Designer, Alex. This terrain is easily tweaked if it doesn't play well. We then go into a phase called "ART1," where the Environment Artists trace around the blocked-out version with a "subdivision

surface" tool. This tool enables the artists to change complex shapes with very few key points, and it's great for creating over-hanging cliffs, without stretching the texture too much. Building Artists replace the cube-like architecture with something more representational. Every model we create is accounted for. Techniques of modelling are very disciplined and researched in the early stages of production. At the end of the ART1 phase, we wait for an approval from the Art Director.

Then onto ART2 (the fun bit), where

we light the landscape, add detailed integration with the terrain and buildings and add vegetation and blends between textures for a bit of eye candy. One more thing on the task list is to implement level of detail (LOD) to the geometry as it moves away from the camera (the player's view). We created the most amazing tool which gradually transforms high-detailed landscapes into low-detailed landscapes the further away they are from the camera. There's been a lot of hair pulling—I'm bald now—but the results have been well worth it!

"The PS2 is a genius piece of electronics design with three graphics processors all working together in harmony."



Robert Hill Character Artist

"Primal is my second game here at Sony Cambridge. I previously worked on C-12 for PS1, working mainly on environments and rendered images for magazines. I have worked in the games industry since graduating from Kingston University with a graphic design and illustration

degree in 1993. Initially leading a team on two football titles for Eidos, Total Football (Megadrive, Amiga), and All Star Soccer (PS1), I've also worked freelance and abroad before returning to work on Prince Naseem Boxing (PS1) for Codemasters."



Working as a character artist on Primal has been my first experience of both using Maya and also developing for the PS2, and I can honestly say there is no looking back. Game development is now a big team effort, so being able to fully develop such an important part of the game means I can concentrate on this task and set the style and look of the in game characters. It also gives me the chance to work closely with all departments from the art director to the designers and animators, as well as keeping to the usual video game restraints so the programming team are happy!

The process of creating a game character for Primal starts with a discussion between myself, Mark Gibbons (Art Director) and Chris Sorrell (Creative Director) to learn more about the character, to look at concept artwork and to learn the details i.e. how important they are in the game, what their animations will be, and if they speak or not. Cut scene and boss characters can generally be more detailed in both texture space and polygon count, possibly having cloth and/or blubber dynamics, or multi-texturing. General fighting characters have to be more efficient and need to be set-up with lower levels of

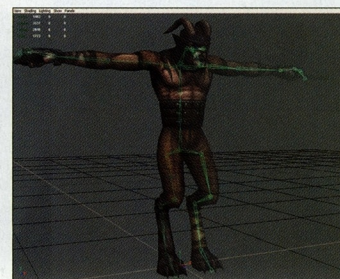
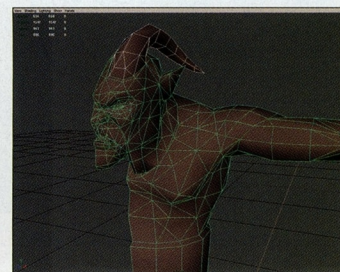
detail when they are in the distance so more can appear on screen.

Modelling starts either by adapting similar models or with unique characters which can be built by extruding box models, sub-dividing faces and manipulating vertices. PS2 models can be much more complex than on PSOne but are still relatively low enough in polygon count to be easily worked on. I then project the mapping for different parts of the body i.e. head, torso, arms, legs etc. and flatten out these UV maps to maximize texture space. I take these maps into Adobe Photoshop and use them as a basis with which to create

my textures. Various layers are built up in Photoshop, using both photographic reference and my own detail, until the final result is more of an illustration than a photograph. It is very important to keep testing the texture on the model back in Maya, as you must always visualize it in 3 dimensions. Once I am happy with all the basic textures, I can then add the detail. To complete the character after modelling and texturing is complete, I have to build a skeleton and weight the model to the joints before the animators can bring it to life. Main characters also need facial animation set-ups and special joints for dynamics movement. In Primal we use a system of clusters (groups of vertices) which are used to manipulate different parts of the face, and eventually create facial poses and speech.

The down side to working on characters appears when changes occur on the project, creating a need to simplify or add to the characters in some way or another, which can also cause knock on effects to other parts of the project. The main character Jen is a classic example of this – she has been constantly upgraded and improved and probably won't be completely finished until near the end of the project....sigh ... However Primal has fantastic diversity of characters and worlds and therefore is very challenging for me as an artist and ultimately rewarding.

“Working as character artist on Primal has been my first experience of both using Maya and developing for the PS2, and I can honestly say there's no looking back.”





Jean-Baptiste Bolcato Producer

"Primal is my first game here at Sony Cambridge. I previously worked on adidas PowerSoccer and adidas PowerSoccer '97 on PS1, O.D.T on PS1, PC, N64 at

Psygnosis, and several prototypes on Dreamcast and PS2 in the early days of the next generation console at Infogrames."

The Sony Cambridge studio has quite an excellent reputation in Action/Adventure games featuring humanoid characters, with the MediEvil series and C12: Final Resistance; but one of the technical challenges that was never really tackled, was the integration of Motion-Capture animation.

Motion-Capture, or "mocap", is a technical word to describe a quite simple process. You've probably all heard of it before, as it's used pretty much everywhere now, so I'll keep it short. Mocap is the process of filming actors in 3D, with a number of infrared cameras placed all over a stage. This way we digitise the movements in space of an actor's skeleton. Actors wear special suits with reflective balls placed at key points of their body (knees, shoulders, feet, head, etc.), so the special cameras can record the positions of the markers and reconstruct a skeleton for each frame of an animation.

From a production point of view, motion capture is expensive but very efficient, because it's fast and realistic. Any good game animation can take 1 to 3 days to do by hand (we call it keyframing). A motion capture move takes 1 minute to capture and maybe 15 minutes to process! And to get the same amount of realism in an animation that you can get when capturing a real actor, you need very talented animators, spending probably an awful lot more time in polishing every last detail.

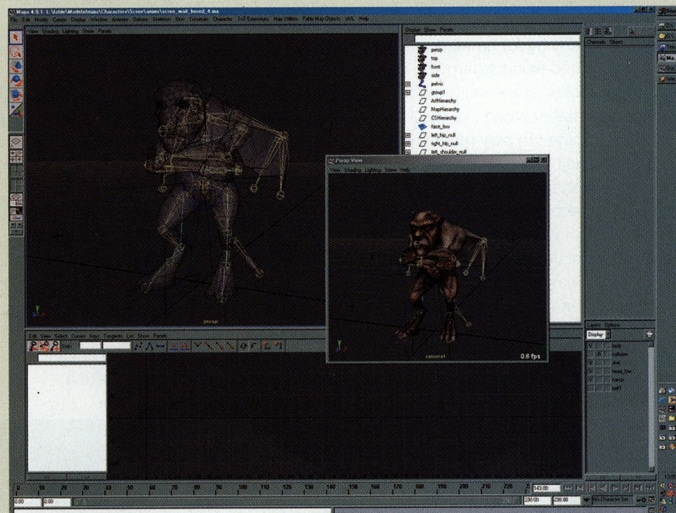
This said, motion capture has

drawbacks too: it is quite a "rigid" approach, as you have to plan your capture sessions long in advance, and shoot hundreds of moves per day trying to forecast what you will need in the game further down the line. Also, if mocap is great for cutscenes and "long" moves that don't need to be interactive, like walk cycles, wait anims, etc... It is much less pertinent for fast and punchy reactive moves like combat or clammers moves. Nothing can beat an animator for that, as he can create the move with gameplay already in mind, and tweak in realtime while discussing with the designers and programmers.

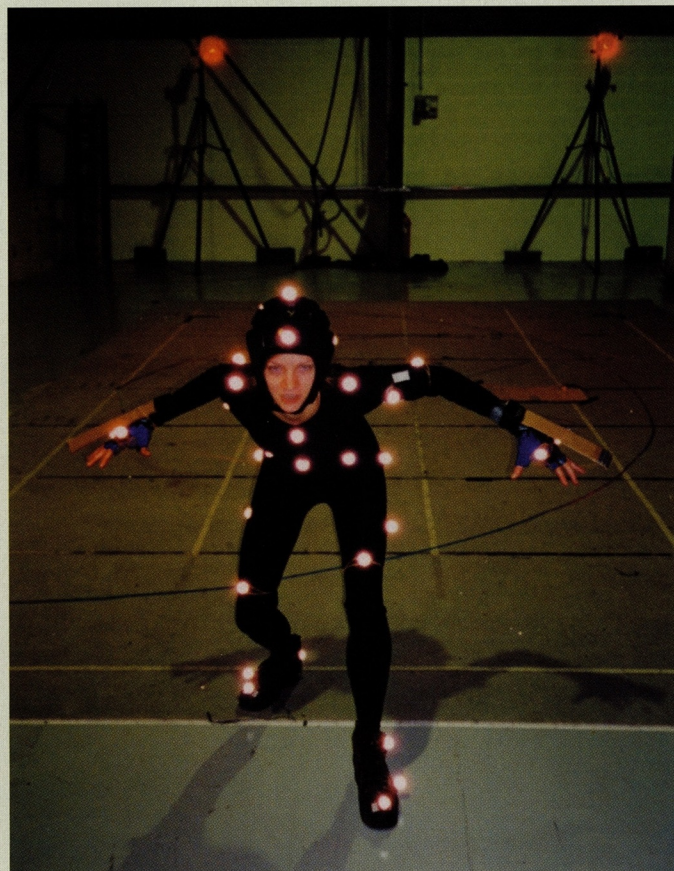
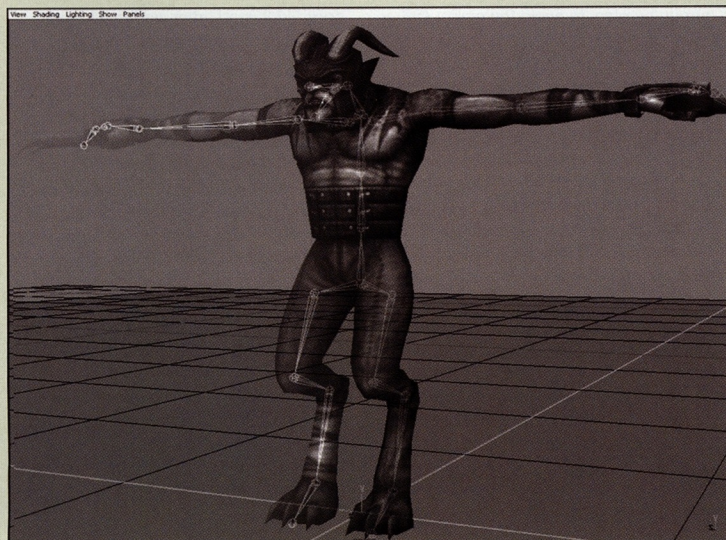
In Primal, Jen the main character is motion captured of course, as she's human (well... half human!). But most of the other biped characters can be motion-captured too, even the very "distorted" demons featuring what we call "doglegs" (see picture). Scree, our wise gargoye sidekick, is motion captured too, but only in cutscenes for the dialogs. We found that "mocap" is very useful to inject life into dialog scenes, so we get mocap actors to do the reverse of "dubbing" in cinema: we get them to move and say the lines as if they were our voice-over actors who recorded the dialog months before.

The next step in technology will allow us to do all-in-one : a full body + face + voice recording... But we're not there yet.

Hopefully quite soon!



"From a production point of view, motion capture is expensive but very efficient, because it's fast and realistic."



Jen's Evolution

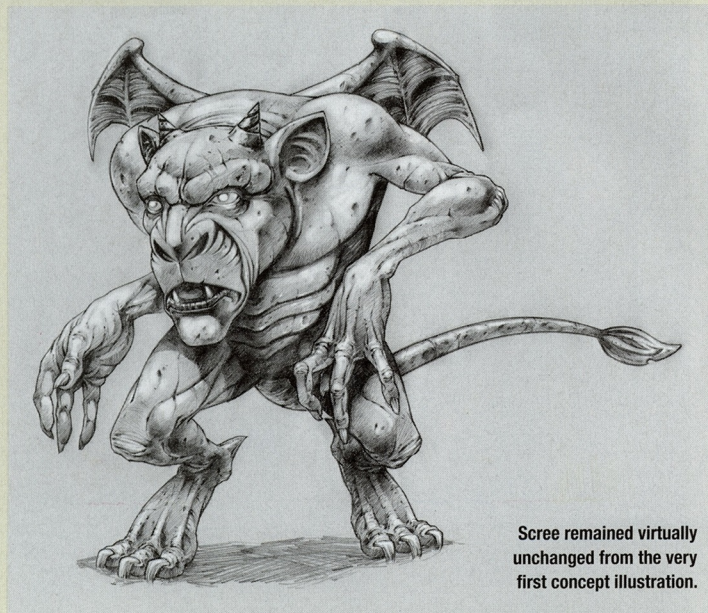
How did Jen and Scree come into existence? Well, after MediEvil there were two types of character I was interested in exploring... SCE Cambridge had never done a game with a female lead, so the moment seemed right for us to try and create a new PlayStation heroine. But at the same time, my thoughts perhaps still in the MediEvil world, I had a number of ideas revolving around using a gargoyle as a central character: stone related abilities and themes that seemed like they could offer some fun play mechanics... Fortunately, as I was deliberating over which direction to take, it struck me that both gameplay and story could be enhanced by having two lead characters; the concept of Jen and the concept of Scree first began to unite!

Knowing what the two characters were, the next steps were deciding who they were and how they would look. Scree was easiest as I had always

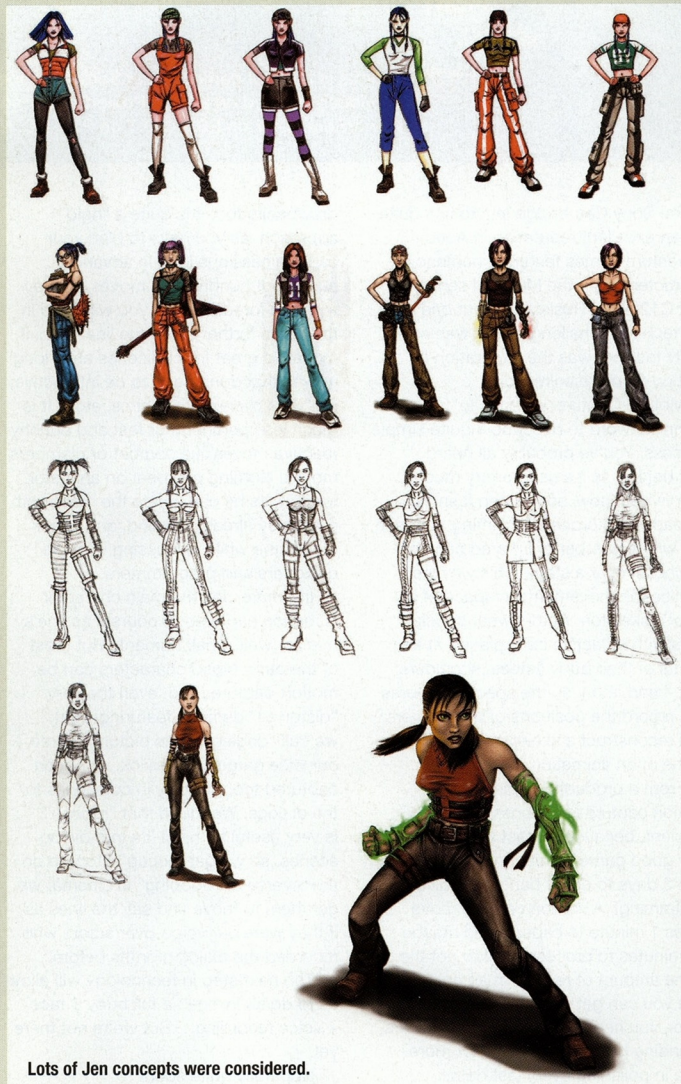
had a clear idea of his appearance and mannerisms. I felt pretty confident that he would be an original and unusual character.

It was the very first concept sketch for Scree that defined his look. Aside from the minor addition of a utility belt, he has remained unchanged ever since. Slightly trickier was personality and voice as we really wanted to avoid him coming across as Jen's "funny little sidekick." To help with this, we decided to make him a noble and strong character, someone with far greater resolve and depth than his diminutive appearance might suggest. We were inspired by the character G'Kar in the TV series *Babylon 5*, and were thrilled when Andreas Katsulas, the actor that played G'Kar, agreed to provide the English language voice for Scree. Scree was now complete!

Jen was much harder to define; we knew we wanted to create a



Scree remained virtually unchanged from the very first concept illustration.



Lots of Jen concepts were considered.

strong heroine, to avoid the obvious computer-game clichés. We also knew that we wanted to make the game about demons, so this, combined with consideration of how we could develop Jen's abilities, led to the idea that she should be able to adopt each demon form. This was great in helping us to differentiate her from other game heroines, but it made it even harder for us to settle on how she should look. We wanted her to morph seamlessly to each form and this required her clothing to look right on both her human and demon bodies. Initially we wanted to make Jen a "clubber," but we found that fashionable, modern clothes looked really odd when worn by a demon! Only by making her a little more alternative and giving her a more rugged, grungey outfit did everything start to click. By the time we had settled upon the right look,

poor Mark (lead artist) had produced over a hundred different concept images for Jen! Personality wise we looked to characters like Buffy and Dark Angel's Max. However, we decided that Jen should start off oblivious to her demon powers and that her discovery of this should coincide with her meeting Scree and their adventure unfolding. Casting Hudson Leick from TV's *Xena* gave us the perfect strength and attitude for Jen's English-language dialogue.

I'm very pleased with where we ended up with both Jen and Scree. We spent quite some time developing them, but I think they make an unusual and engaging pairing, so hopefully it was worth the effort! Certainly their personal motivations and the interactions between them offer unique qualities to *Primal*, and this really is the essence of what we set out to achieve.

The Development of Primal's Story

Written by Chris Sorrell, Creative Director, Primal

Primal has a complex, twisting storyline, one that has taken us quite some time to fully develop.

There are two main levels to the story: spanning everything is the notion of an eternal battle between order and chaos, with our characters Jen and her boyfriend Lewis becoming caught up in this conflict. At a second level, the four realms in the game each possess their own plot and back plot, which in turn fit into the overarching main storyline.

The very starting point for everything—the story and the game's structure—was Tarot. I've always had

a passing interest in Tarot, primarily down to the mysticism and potency of the imagery present in the cards. As I was considering story possibilities for Primal, this came to mind and I quickly latched onto it as something a little bit different for us to build upon. The more I researched, the more I discovered that literally every aspect of Tarot is based upon elements of balance and symbolism, good versus evil, dark versus light; each of the four suites represents different times of day, seasons, elements... These things all suggested locations and detail that

we incorporated into the design of the game—its four main kingdoms, its four demon races, and various associations we have for each of these. However, as we moved forward, we started to leave pure Tarot concepts behind us as we decided that the main themes we wanted to project were the idea of the demon races and of course Jen's personal stake in the story—the unlocking of her demon aspects and her search for Lewis.

Many of the prominent characters in Primal are leaders in each of the demon realms. These characters have roles that

map quite closely onto characters from the Tarot deck—e.g. Kings, Queens, Princes—however, these are characters that are entirely our own creations in terms of their exact personalities and purposes, each usually significant in their realm's back plot. Speaking of which, the realm plots are actually quite complex little stories in their own right... These are a mix of ideas borrowed from mythological sources (e.g. the back plot in the first realm of the game has elements of Celtic myth), and our own original ideas. Events in these sub-plots are the things that most directly define the flow of the game.

As I'm sure I've mentioned previously in this diary, characters are one of the most important assets in Primal. We've seen very clearly that character and story go completely hand-in-hand, and throughout development have learnt a great deal about how to tell an expansive, gradually unfolding story through the experiences of its central characters. Many times it has surprised me how close making next-gen-story-based games is becoming to filmmaking... This is especially true when it comes to scripting—for us a process shared between members of our design team and an external script writer. In addition to Jen and Scree there are around twenty other characters that feature prominently in the game, so creating the script proved to be a major undertaking... I'm glad to say I'm very pleased with the end result, and better still has been the experience of seeing talented actors breathing life into each of the parts!

So, finally, as we reach the alpha phase of development and the art team are hard at work on the game's cutscenes, our storytelling odyssey nears completion. It's been a long journey!



"The very starting point for everything—the story and the game's structure—was Tarot."

Music in Primal

Written by Chris Sorrell, Creative Director, Primal

I'm sure we've mentioned before that we wanted to distance Primal as much as possible from traditional fantasy-based games and the many clichés of the genre. This is a notion we've tried to follow through on in areas like the mix of gameplay, the way we're telling the story, the characters and their voices. It's also something we've tried to do with the music...

Certainly when I think of big-name fantasy and (especially) RPG games, it's very much a stirring classical soundtrack that I expect to hear in them, and they almost never seem to disappoint. Now I've nothing against this, and of course *MediEvil 1* and *2* both featured terrific Danny Elfman-inspired classical scores, but for *Primal* I wanted the music to link a little more with Jen, to act as a reminder that she is a modern-day girl from our world and not some barbarian warrior princess used to cracking skulls for a living!

So... we definitely wanted to feature some contemporary music. The first place where the need for this became apparent was the intro sequence. This piece of introductory story shows Jen's boyfriend Lewis on stage as his band play to a packed nightclub. As I've covered previously we ended up making Jen something of an alternative rock chick since this gave her an image that worked well with her demon forms. Obviously Lewis is part of this same scene, and we needed to find a suitable sound for his band... So, one night I was pondering this... I tend to listen to a reasonably

broad range of music, but certainly a little biased towards the more noisy, rock/alternative/industrial end of the spectrum! On this particular night I was listening to a band called 16 Volt, a US rock/industrial outfit probably not widely known, but highly respected in their scene, and with a number of well respected albums behind them... It struck me that their sound could work perfectly, not just for the specific case of the intro, but also as backing music during in game combat sequences. Seizing the moment, I looked on the 'net, found an email address for Eric Powell, lead singer and driving force behind the band, and sent him a mail!

Thankfully the band were happy to work with us, and we soon reached an agreement where we're using a number of 16 Volt songs, a mix of tracks from their last album and new material. In general the band's sound is built around crunchy guitars and drums, added to which are various programmed elements and of course Eric's vocals—although in our intro sequence, Lewis is supposed to be the singer, something that Eric was kind enough to accommodate!

Early inspiration for in-game combat music came from the fantastic Dust Brothers soundtrack to *Fight Club*. I think their tracks add tremendously to the power and pace of the film's crazy fight scenes... Using instrumental versions of 16 Volt tracks I like to think our combat sequences benefit in the same way.

Of course I'm sure there will be people that won't like 16 Volt; that's always the way with music! To those

of you, I can only say, "Sorry"—there is a volume option! However I believe that most players will find that their sound complements the in-game action perfectly... Personally I'd rather pursue a slightly controversial route that I believe in than try to please everybody and end up with something quite bland!

One final thing: for those of you who

enjoyed *MediEvil*'s soundtrack, I should mention that we are still working with its talented creators. Outside of combat, *Primal* features film-like scoring for cutscenes and other atmosphere-building moments and this alone will probably total more than ninety minutes of music!



For more information on the band, 16Volt, please visit their website at www.16volt.com

Gary Richards Programmer (Audio), **Lee Banyard** Sound Designer

Audio is just as important as graphics when trying to create the correct atmosphere for a game. On past projects programmers worked closely with the sound designers, implementing the sound effects they created. Although this worked well, the sound designers sometimes found it frustrating to have to wait to hear their sounds in game. With *Primal*, the sound system has been specifically designed to allow our sound designers to implement sound effects and has removed the need for almost all programmer support. There is a sound editor which runs on a PlayStation 2, allowing the sound designer to apply all the features within our sound system and hear exactly how the sound effect will sound in-game. They also have the ability to add sound callbacks inside animations to trigger sound effects and can export these animations to audition the sound instantly in game.

The sound system in *Primal* has all the usual features you would expect—volume-fading, reverb when going into caves and tunnels, 3D positioning, along with Dolby Pro-Logic. It also allows real-time manipulation of pitch and volume, which can be applied to existing samples to help create realistic

environmental sound effects, like wind and rain.

Most sound effects for *Primal* are created via layering and sequencing different sound elements using the multi-track audio tool, Protocols. These individual sound elements might be original recordings produced by ourselves, using a portable DAT recorder and microphone; or they might be taken from our library of licensed sound effects CDs, similar to those used in movies and television.

When creating new sound effects, it's possible to import movies of in-game animation to ensure the created sounds synchronise perfectly with what the player sees. For example, each of Jen's combat moves is captured as a movie file and sound effects that suit her actions are layered and added on multiple tracks. To her basic vocal sounds, we might layer other different elements depending if she's in a certain demon form.

The final in-game speech is usually recorded towards the end of the project. Until that point placeholder dialogue is used, which normally means recording a team member using our internal recording studio. The animators use this audio as a guide when

creating cutscenes. Once the script is finished we approach real actors to provide the in-game speech. For example, the English voice of Jen is being provided by Hudson Leick (who plays Callisto in *Xena*) and Andreas Katsulas (who plays G'Kar from *Babylon5*) is providing the voice of Scree.

This speech is also used to create the lip-sync animation for each character during the game. Each actor records a set of 40 words and a program called MagPie takes a phoneme of each word and associates it with a specific mouth shape. When MagPie has a phoneme for each word it can scan each speech file comparing its own phoneme set against those in the speech file and creating a list of mouth poses. These mouth poses are then applied to the character's model at the same time as the speech is playing.

Recording, editing and implementing audio in-game is a big task and has sometime been overlooked in the past. With *Primal*, we hope to create a movie-style feel with realistic environmental and character sound effects to complement the production values within the rest of the game, and we're really looking forward to the challenge!

Dominic Cahalin Designer

Notable past work:

- Producer on early PS1 title Jumping Flash
- Senior designer This is Football (PS1), This is Football 2 (PS1), This is Football 2003 (PS2)

Good news...Primal is now in its final phase of development, and it is deeply rewarding to see the initial vision of the game rapidly becoming a concrete reality.

I am a new recruit to the Primal team, drafted in to help complete various design tasks as the final deadline looms large, and also to cast a fresh set of eyes over the gameplay, and make tweaky suggestions where appropriate. My previous job was as senior designer on the This Is Football series, and it's been fascinating for me to move on to a completely different type of game style, especially one as ambitious and cutting edge as Primal.

One of the key features that drives the gameplay in Primal is the ability to switch at will between Jen (the heroine) and Scree (her gargoyle sidekick). This offers up many ingenious scenarios, where the player

must cleverly combine the diverse abilities of these two characters to successfully negotiate puzzles and vicious enemy encounters.

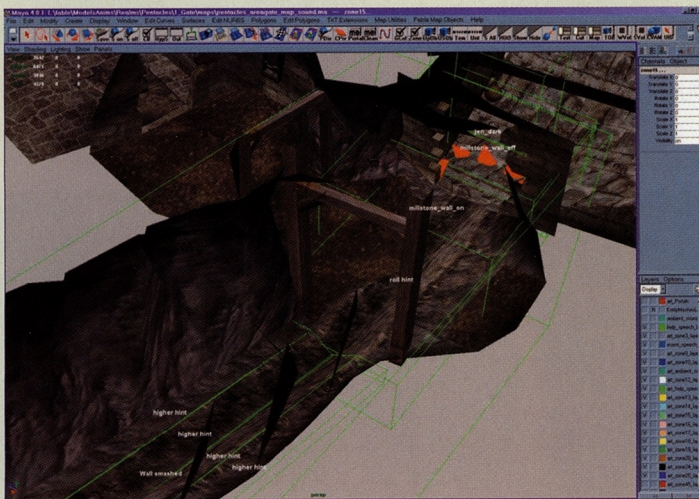
This all-important relationship between Jen and Scree does not work solely on a mechanical level, though: Primal is a game which also focusses on convincing emotional interplay between its characters. Jen and Scree converse wittily, angrily, and sympathetically with each other at various stages throughout the game. The professional script gives each protagonist a believable, multifaceted personality, which really helps draw the player into their deadly quest.

With a game as vast and complex as Primal, the team have always been aware that there is a danger of players occasionally getting lost or being unsure about how to achieve their next task. Primal offers up a neat

solution to this perennial problem: at any time during the game Jen can ask Scree for advice, and Scree will offer up information, directions and clues to help the player on his way. On the odd occasion when Scree is not really sure what to do next, Jen has been known to tease him unmercifully!

My current design task is mapping Scree's advice comments to the gameworld, making sure that the player gets just the right amount of information at just the right time to make Primal challenging but never too frustrating...

....In just a few weeks all of the game elements will be in place, and then the polishing and fine tuning of gameplay will begin; this final stage of development will be critical in defining whether Primal will end up a good game, or a truly great game...rest assured that the team are busy striving for the latter.



"Primal is now in its final phase of development, and it's deeply rewarding to see the initial vision of the game rapidly becoming a concrete reality."

Mark Green Communications Manager for Sony's Cambridge Studio

Mark started in the industry eight years ago, working on Highlander for the Atari Jaguar CD (remember that one? It's the one that looked like a toilet seat!). Nearly six years ago he joined Sony and has since worked on a number of titles, including WipEout and Colony Wars Red Sun. Primal will be his first PS2 title, although he's already working on Cambridge's next game, GhostHunter.

So what else goes into making a game? Well, beyond a lot of hard work—the core team have been working on Primal for over three years now and for the last seven months they've been working at least 12 hours a day, seven days a week: there are all the behind-the-scenes details that need arranging.

For example, we wanted to have Hollywood actors play the main characters in the game, but these actors don't just fall into your lap and ask to play the role, you have to go out there and find them. Some are busy, some aren't interested (more fool them, I say!), some are only interested in money (one wanted \$1M+ just to do the voice of Jen!) and some are just perfect for what

you need, but you have to go through layers and layers of agents and unions and contracts before things are sealed. Hudson Leick (Callisto in *Xena: Warrior Princess*) was at the top of our list for actresses to play Jen, but she is rather reclusive, choosing to spend much of her time studying and teaching Yoga, so it took a while to track her down. And Andreas Katsulas (G'Kar in *Babylon 5*) was always the one person we had in mind for Scree; he was even the person we had in mind when we were designing Scree, so those of you who know what Andreas looks like may see some likeness in the face of Scree (but for heaven's sake don't tell him!). We're incredibly pleased with the results

that definitely made all the late night telephone calls with LA worthwhile.

Other things need arranging too, from the band that provided all the combat music for the game (American band 16Volt) to musicians and composers (Bob'n'Barn from *MediEvil 1 & 2*) to create the music we use for atmosphere and to score the cut-scenes within the game. We also decided that this music needed to be created by a live Orchestra and not just synthesized, so we went over to Prague and recorded it there with the Prague City Orchestra, conducted by Nic Raine of James Bond fame.

And a million other things need doing as well, including things like

this. It may sound silly to say that writing small articles like this or giving interviews takes up a lot of our time but Primal is a huge game, it will be launched across Europe, the US, and Japan as well as other places that so often get forgotten – Russia, Australia, South Africa and Saudi Arabia just to name a few.

Well Primal is nearly done and should be on the shelves in February. (How a game goes from leaving the studio through manufacturing to the shops is another story for another time!) We've worked very hard, for a very long time. Our blood, sweat and tears have gone into this game, we can only hope you enjoy it as much as we have. **play**

"Our blood, sweat and tears have gone into this game, we can only hope that you enjoy it as much as we have."



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2002

YEAR IN REVIEW

In a year like this, it's exhausting attempting to come up with the best of the best, especially when you have the likes of Metroid Prime, Mario Sunshine, Rygar, Resident Evil and other extraordinary achievements battling it out for the top honor.

Of course, we've most certainly left out some of your personal favorites—where's Vice City?—but that's exactly what makes 2002 such a memorable year for gaming: so many treasures existed that it's impossible to give credit to everything, even when credit is deserved. When you get down to the heart of what makes an awards list so much fun, it can be an incredibly subjective decision, but that passion for personal favorites is what it's all about. You'll vehemently agree with some of our choices, get pissed with others. As long as you're enjoying the healthy debate, our mission is accomplished. 2002 was complicated and complex, exciting and full of change. Trying to distill it all into the following pages only further drove the point home that video gaming is as strong as it has ever been...

40-61

GENRE CATEGORIES

ACTION
ACTION SHOOTING
PLATFORMING
ADVENTURE
ADVENTURE HORROR
FIRST PERSON SHOOTER
ALTERNATIVE
ROLE PLAYING
RACING
MUSIC
PUZZLE
FIGHTING
SHOOTING
SIMULATION
XTREME SPORTS
RACING SIMULATION
BASED ON MOVIE/TV
ONLINE
SPORTS

62-66

SUBCATEGORIES

ART DIRECTION
MUSIC
WRITING
VOICE ACTING
CG
MODELS
CHARACTER DESIGN
LEVEL DESIGN
CHARACTER: FEMALE
CHARACTER: MALE
CHARACTER: OTHER
SPECIAL EFFECTS
MOST INNOVATIVE
MOST UNDER-RATED

68-83

OVERALL

BEST GAMES: GAME BOY ADVANCE
BEST GAME: XBOX
BEST GAME: GAMECUBE
BEST GAME: PLAYSTATION 2
BEST GAME: PSONE
GAME OF THE YEAR
STAFF COMMENT

Action

2002

Straightforward forge ahead: kill and skill. No levers to throw, people to meet, or riddles to solve.

Winner

Rygar: The Legendary Adventure

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **tecmo** / publisher: **tecmo**

Tecmo hadn't made a game like Rygar since the glory days of 8-bit, back in late '80s when they helped fashion the action platform category with a little game called Ninja Gaiden, the first ever game to incorporate cinemas. The fact didn't really hit me until I began playing this achievement among PS2 games, which sparked something inside me I don't think I've felt since my long stint with Ryu Hibasu—the sense of playing a game from a developer in complete command of the hardware, wielding its tools like a master magician. There's not an action game to compare Rygar with; that's how utterly superior it is in every way. It begins with art direction, spills into world and level design, but lives and breathes in the manipulation of the lead character along with the physics applied and meticulous collision associated to everything his Diskarmor comes in contact with. Whether you're laying waste to ancient columns as dust and rock flails in your midst or hacking away at a gigantic medieval creature, the connection with the actual action is extraordinary. Set to a score from the Moscow International Symphony Orchestra, it's driven directly into your cortex vortex through masterful visuals and intriguing gameplay that never stops building until the amazing climax. Interwoven, the cinemas are as epic, voiced and sang with great heart and care. Action games like this just don't happen; at least they didn't used to. Imagining what they'll produce in the future with games like Ninja Gaiden, and considering what they've achieved thus far on the PS2 and Xbox, one must consider Tecmo among the most elite developers of such games in the world. Rygar isn't just action game of the year, it's the best action game ever.

"Rygar isn't just action game of the year, it's the best action game ever."



Rygar is a game of deep beauty and majesty, as pictured at left.

NOTEWORTHY



Shinobi

playstation 2 / overworks / sega

A sterling and challenging 3D update to a classic series. Though it never reaches the heights that it could have, this new Shinobi is still a fantastic modern action game.



Onimusha 2

playstation 2 / capcom

Lucious pre-rendered visuals and crisp, addictive gameplay brought this over-the-top sequel to life, even if it lost some of the class of its predecessor.



Action Game of the Year
Tecmo's Rygar: The Legendary Adventure

Action Shooting

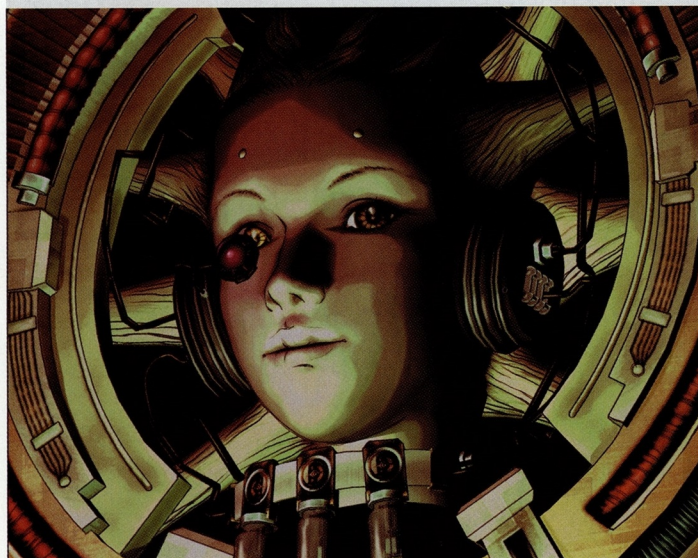
2002

All the elements of an action game with an emphasis on targeting and shooting.

Winner

GunValkyrie

system: **xbox** / developer: **smilebit** / publisher: **sega**



GunValkyrie isn't for everyone; in fact, I'll go as far as saying it's really for advanced players only, or those hoping to become so. The boost and hover mechanics, incorporated with simultaneous shooting and dodging, requires the use of both analog sticks (including their use as buttons) and the buttons themselves, making playing this game like playing an instrument—the controller your Ocarina of movement. In the event this otherwise useless ability is embedded in your DNA profile as it is ours, GunValkyrie is nothing short of a revelation, the kind of game where beating a level is one thing, but having complete mastery over it is downright empowering. The way in which it's presented—which can only be crafted by the Japanese for some reason—is something of an action ballet, a term I use whenever I describe it due to its fluid nature. A good portion of the shooting and dodging in GunValkyrie takes place in mid air, although hovering is not an option. The only way to keep Kelly or Saburouta airborne is by continually boosting, up-back-left-or-right while targeting and firing on enemies coming in from all angles. Once grounded the assaults come by way of a clever arachnid foe, at times cunning and at others swarming, but always present. In between levels, you'll find no cinemas, no headquarters, no witty commanding officer—just a place to upgrade, read intelligence reports, catch your breath and move on. GunValkyrie is all about you. The style and grace by which it's presented is a rare commodity, stringing together events in a way that can only be experienced through mastery. Games like this don't happen often and when they do, they rarely look this beautiful.

"The style and grace by which GunValkyrie is presented is a rare commodity, stringing together events in a way that can only be experienced through mastery."



No doubt GunValkyrie is one of the most unique-looking games the world has ever seen.

NOTEWORTHY



Contra: Shattered Soldier

playstation 2 / konami

This is the proper way to update a classic side scrolling shooter. The level of tuning and precision in the play is beyond current 3D standards, harkening back to the glory days of 2D.



Gungrave

playstation 2 / red entertainment / sega

Just pure style and action, Sega's Gungrave is an aesthetic tour de force. As in the best shooter tradition, it's mindless, gorgeous fun.



Action Shooting Game of the Year
Sega's GunValkyrie

Platforming

Any game where jumping is a predominant part of the play

2002

Winner

Super Mario Sunshine

system: **gamecube** / developer: **nintendo** / publisher: **nintendo**



There are many, many factors which contribute to the overall success of Super Mario Sunshine as a game, but if we were to distill it down to one thing, it would be an understanding. Specifically, the understanding on the part of the developer of how to make a fun and engaging experience out of thin air. This can only come from years of experience.

Super Mario Sunshine astounds in its use of play mechanics and level objectives, with each task more challenging and fun than the last. And unlike most games, there is a real

sense of discovery here as you figure out on your own how to maneuver around the environment to greatest effect, and no two people will play the game exactly the same.

Perhaps most impressive is the sheer level of execution evident here. Everything, from the way the water looks and feels to the way Mario's water pack clinks as he runs, is designed with an inspiring attention to detail. Even the apparently simple graphics are alive with reflections, heat haze, water refractions, and an almost impossibly bright color palette. This game dazzles in every way.



"Super Mario Sunshine astounds in its use of play mechanics and level objectives."



No game was as immediately fun or engaging in 2002 than Super Mario Sunshine.

NOTEWORTHY



Maximo playstation 2 / capcom

Paying proper homage to the NES classic Ghouls 'N' Ghosts, Maximo was perfectly challenging and ripe with play mechanics that only a real enthusiast could truly appreciate. Its lighthearted haunts dazzled.



Sly Cooper playstation 2 / sucker punch / sony

It lacked the scope of some of the higher-profile titles of the year, but SC's brand of traditional, contained platforming and saturated visual sparkle propelled it to the very top. Sly himself should be a mascot.



Platforming Game of the Year
Nintendo's Super Mario Sunshine

Adventure

2002

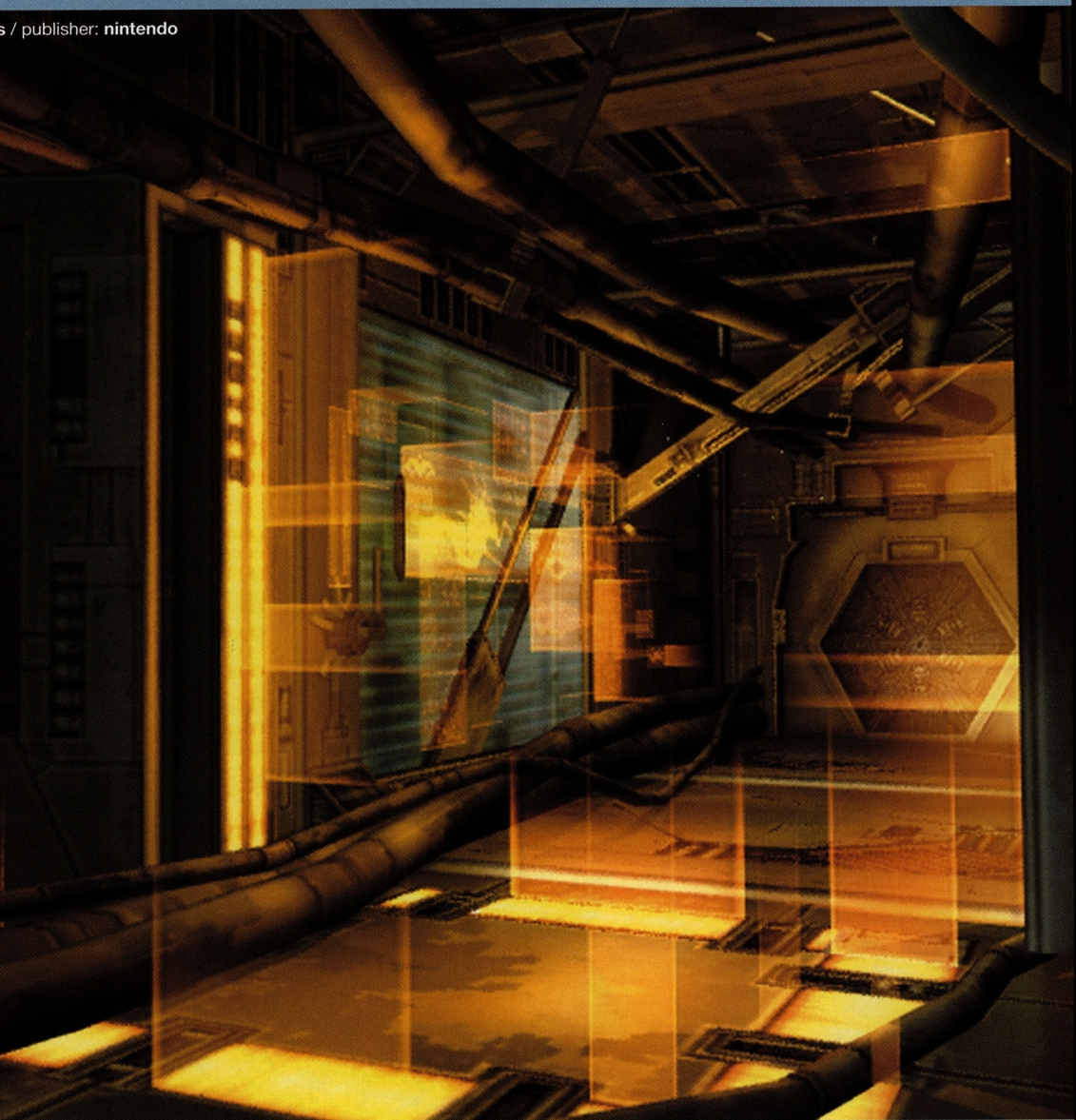
Action with elements of interwoven story, puzzle solving, and deep exploration.

Winner

Metroid Prime

system: **gamecube** / developer: **retro studios** / publisher: **nintendo**

You might think that Metroid Prime belongs in the first person shooter category, but it doesn't. This is an adventure game through and through. In fact, it may even spawn its own genre: first person adventure. For at the heart of this game is not shooting, though there is a fair amount of that, but rather exploration and discovery. You will marvel at the ingenious way the game is laid out, with level design that does everything it can to provide a rewarding, and often surreally beautiful game play experience. One of the stars here is the GameCube itself, which with each passing month seems to reveal more and more of its true potential as a piece of hardware. In the right hands, the machine is capable of rendering scenes of incredible impact.



NOTEWORTHY



Ratchet & Clank
playstation 2 / **insomniac** / **sony**

Insomniac's playful and technically brilliant adventure game proved that there is room in this genre for many different ideas.



Enclave
xbox / **starbreeze** / **conspiracy**

Enclave won our award for best models of the year, and they are not to be missed. The game itself is pretty good looking as well!



Adventure Game of the Year
Nintendo's Metroid Prime

Adventure Horror

2002

Interactive tales of the macabre, should either frighten or disgust. Killing, maiming, bludgeoning a must.

Winner

Resident Evil

system: **gamecube** / developer: **capcom** / publisher: **capcom**

Yeah, yeah, yeah, we know: Resident Evil is a refurbished artifact from the ancient PSone's treasure chest, but that doesn't make its hold any less gripping. In fact, this GameCube exclusive is a better game all around, benefiting from changes both subtle and more apparent. When you think RE, you think mood and imagery, zombies and gore, but never have all these delicacies been so awesomely displayed. Everything in the creepy mansion has been redrawn, details have been added and rearranged, rooms shifted and monsters redesigned. For sheer visual detail and immediate impact, Resident Evil's prerendered setting is unmatched. But it's more than the sophistication of the imagery. There is still a mystery, a darkly inviting presence spilling into the shadowy rooms and halls of the mansion, a grand display of artistry and atmospheric manipulation that even the latest Resident Evil: 0 doesn't contain. And like all the REs before and certainly to come, the way the zombies lurch and groan while gasping for your flesh is chilling. Those who get it appreciate the tension and languid pacing, accepting the control scheme and abstract qualities as part of the overall effect. To you all, marvel at the best Resident Evil and the best survival horror game of the year.



Say what you want about Resident Evil, but little compares to its gorgeous, haunting imagery.



NOTEWORTHY



Eternal Darkness

gamecube / silicon knights / nintendo

This one freaked us out just as much as Resident Evil, using story and odd effects to a creepy degree of success. There's nothing like experiencing death...



Fatal Frame

playstation 2 / tecmo

Fatal Frame was a much more subtle, lower-profile journey into the heart of horror, but its ghostly visions of death and decay grew to a powerful climax.

First Person Shooter

The steering around of an arm with a gun or other object of death attached to it through various hazardous situations. Feet not included.

Winner

Medal of Honor: Frontline

system: playstation 2, xbox, gamecube / developer: ea / publisher: ea



The setting is World War II, the conflict is the Allied Power—namely, the German soldiers who fought with the same thirst for victory as the other side. Facing a foreign soldier as he barks orders in his native language took on new, extreme meaning when you're focusing your sniper site on his steel helmet. Pop. There goes one more enemy to his death.

In Medal of Honor: Frontline, mowing-down a swarm of enemy soldiers was not like exploding a rocket gun in the company of squishy monsters. A human quality was brought to the game, and you really did feel like you're sending a very real enemy to his death. We were dropped directly into the chaos of war, living the intensity and destruction to full effect.

Medal of Honor: Frontline opened with one of the great moments in gaming, a very visceral, very spectacular virtual staging of D-Day—bodies explode, mortar blasts rip into the beach, bullets sizzle from unseen directions. It's an incredible rush. Moving through bunkers and eventually out into the somber night sky, the game shifted down a gear, but never was there a lack of emotional intensity; when Medal of Honor was not on full throttle, you remained staunchly involved and bound by tension. The authentic scenery was both technically superb and artistically accomplished, brushed with gritty texture and organic colorings that go for absolute realism. Medal of Honor: Frontline set out to create the conditions and horror of a major war, while maintaining basic gameplay scenarios at their finest. It succeeded in ways few first-person shooters—and any game for that matter—even attempt to explore.

Red Faction 2

playstation 2 / volition / thq

It could be argued that RF2's FPS action was at times just as intense as Moh's. As a greatly enhanced sequel, the game improved on its deformation technology, and the look continually impressed.



Serious Sam

xbox / sierra

Serious Sam had no serious intentions other than to pack the screen with ridiculous amounts of chaos, give you giant weapons for point and shoot gameplay. Its cartoon insanity was an absolute blast.



NOTEWORTHY

Alternative

2002

A game possessing completely new or combined elements resulting in unique and innovative gameplay.

Winner

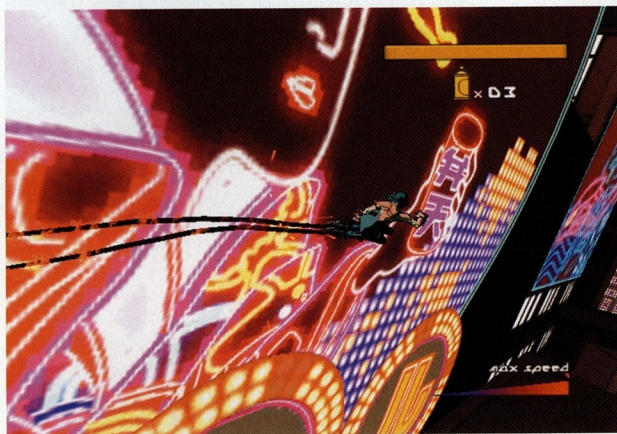
Jet Set Radio Future

system: **xbox** / developer: **smilebit** / publisher: **sega**

As developers continue to create fresh new concepts that don't fit into any specific genre, what was once a throw-away category has become one of the highest honors we can bestow upon a game, evidenced this year by three very strong, very different, and very special offerings. Herdy Gerdy was like a storybook with a controller attached, sending players across lush, vast plains, quaint villages, and dark keeps, herding Doops to save the people of his enchanted land. Blinx, the new fat cat from the creator of Sonic, manipulated time and gave new meaning to the word "suck." And Jet Set Radio Future...well, Future just did it all.

We contemplated including JSRF with platforming, shifted over to adventure, and even considered action/role-playing, considering you unlock new characters and are on a quest of sorts—albeit tagging over rival gang's graffiti, applying a fresh coat of paint to the local PD, and fighting the good fight against an all-powerful foe. JSRF does all of the above in droves and at the same time sets a new benchmark in world population and design. The heart of Jet Set Radio Future, though, is its flamboyance, brought to life through professor K's underground radio—a corporate menace we love to hate; and of course the GGs, a pack of chicks and dudes fashioned for timeless admiration. Indeed the alternative category has blossomed. Not that growing a man-fish in a tank wasn't a thrill, but I'm glad things have progressed.

"Jet Set Radio Future does it all and at the same time sets a new benchmark in world population and design."



No, games don't look much better than this... This one has style to burn.

NOTEWORTHY



Blinx: The Time Sweeper

xbox / artoon / microsoft

The manipulation of time is an inspired idea, pulled off here with the sparkling charm of Naoto Ohshima. Like most good and alternative games, this one took extended play to fully reveal itself.



Herdy Gerdy

playstation 2 / core / eidos

The game that passed everyone by, Core's Herdy Gerdy was an unabashed artistic achievement, combining truly original and engaging gameplay with a three dimensional hand-drawn look.



Alternative Game of the Year
Sega's Jet Set Radio Future

Role Playing

2002

Self-contained battles, deep story, heavy commerce, towns, leveling up.

Winner

Suikoden III

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **konami** / publisher: **konami**

The best role-playing games suck us down the fantasy hole, revealing a magical universe of treacherous passages and bustling villages, of spirited sidekicks and fierce battles. Heavy themes and dark moments of devastating magic and world domination often slither through the journey, adding urgent chaos to the serene beauty of the land. If you play role-playing games religiously, then you understand how emotionally involving all this epic melodrama can be—and you must play Suikoden III.

The game told one of the most involving, smartly written stories in an RPG, a gripping tale of redemption and love, of the consequences of difficult choices and unchecked passion. Of course, like most games of this type, war became an underpinning theme, but it was delivered with understated introspection and familiar yet affecting dialogue.

Instead of unspooling a linear adventure, Suikoden III followed its characters through several jump-cut chapters, allowing you to

periodically choose whose arc you want to develop, before threads are tied together for an extended climax. This could have easily turned out to be a distracting gimmick, but as the story begins to reveal its riches, the interlocking events increased meaning and strength, and the crosscutting of dialogue and important moments becomes more involving.

This was not an RPG to rival the production values of an FFX, but that didn't mean there weren't many moments that impressed. More than anything, it was the warmth and personal touch that gradually extended its hold, beguiling us to ignore the technological shortcomings. Part of the appeal is the sense of friendship and camaraderie that grew from the castle fortress, which slowly was given delightful shape as you recruited inhabitants of the land for support in the struggle. True, the RPG frontier may have been painfully barren this year, but place Suikoden III next to the best in the genre, and it more than holds its ground.



"This was not an RPG to rival the production values of an FFX, but that didn't mean there weren't many moments that impressed."

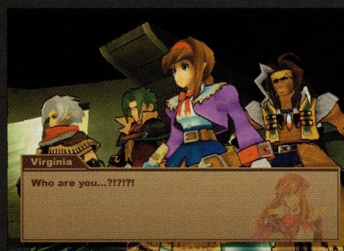
Simplistic by cutting edge standards, but full of charm.



NOTEWORTHY

Kingdom Hearts playstation 2 / square

Square's Kingdom Hearts told a swift and engaging tale to the tune of Disney, and featured some of the most well animated and modeled fantasy characters yet seen. Great real-time battle system to boot.



Wild Arms 3 playstation 2 / mediavision / sony

A beautiful and unique visual style came together with classic Japanese role playing conventions to produce this very entertaining RPG. The old west never seemed so appealing.

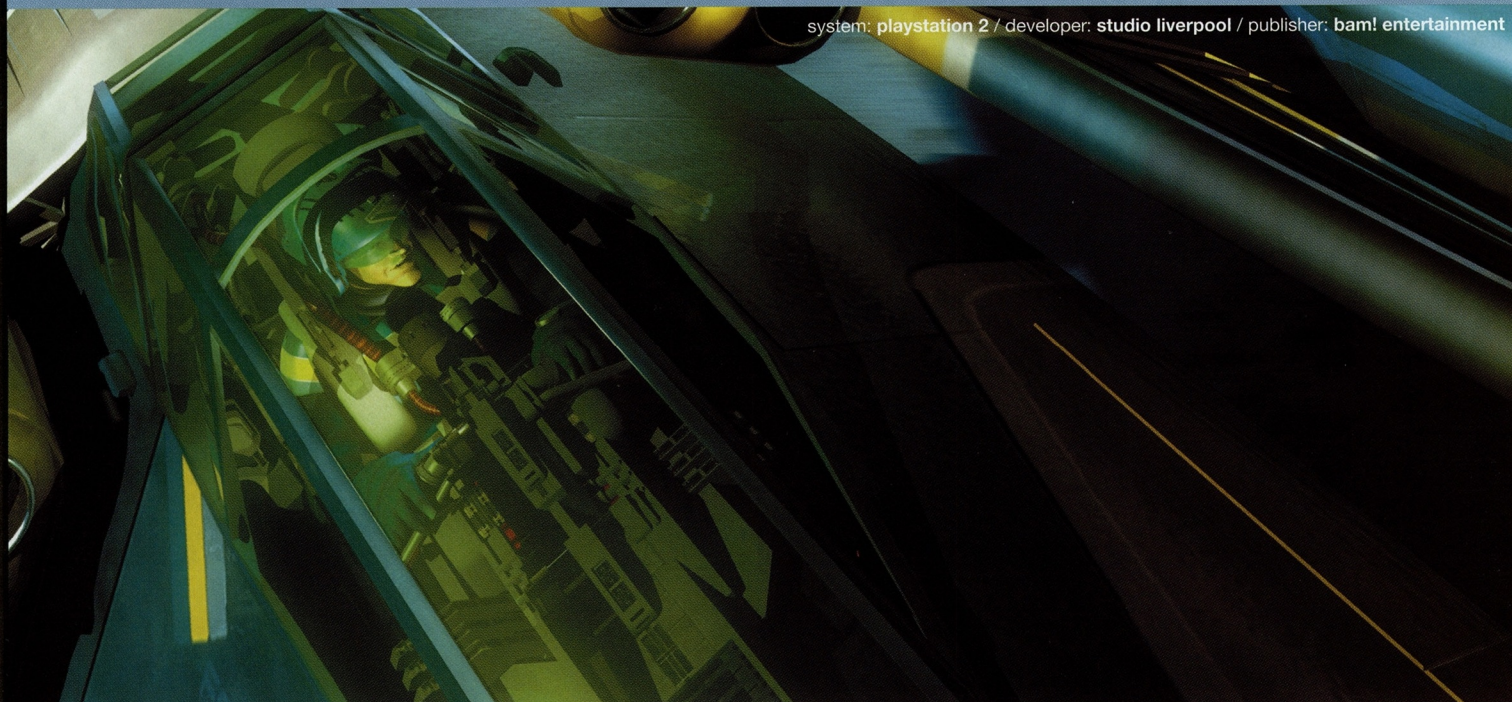
Racing Alternative

Racing with elements of shooting, ramming, and/or the use of various power-ups.

Winner

Wipeout Fusion

system: playstation 2 / developer: studio liverpool / publisher: bam! entertainment



The original template for futuristic racing is still the best. Just as Mario Kart created a genre unto itself, so too did the first Wipeout. And just as no competitor ever equalled Nintendo's model, no one has approached the awesome gameplay of the Wipeout series, even if development has shifted between companies.

Though it was a long time coming to the US, and it arrived without too much fanfare, Wipeout Fusion certainly hit all the right notes. First and foremost was the game's magnificent physics engine. Almost nothing feels as good as piloting an F9000 racer through the twisting and soaring courses of the Wipeout universe. Skimming just above the surface,

the physical act of caressing the craft through the turns, flowing it around the track, was an experience not to be missed. As always, it took a good amount of skill to get around cleanly, and add weapon use to the mix, and the game represented a fair challenge, especially so as one got farther into it.

But as good as Wipeout Fusion was, no doubt there was room for improvement. Having been delayed a bit, the graphic state of the art passed the game by in the US, and the lack of Designer's Republic graphic design dulled the series' once impeccable visual presentation. These are surface complaints to be sure, and do not compromise the great fun and challenge inherent in the game.

"Though it was a long time coming, Fusion certainly hit all the right notes."

Quantum Redshift

xbox / curly monsters / microsoft

Quantum Redshift certainly had it all over Wipeout Fusion in terms of graphics and game structure, just missing out through a lack of truly satisfying physics and control.



Need for Speed Hot Pursuit 2

ps2, xb, gc / ea studios / ea

This spiritual successor to Need for Speed III certainly lived up to expectations with great cars, huge courses, and highly addictive chase-based play.



NOTEWORTHY

Shooting

This would be the category for shooting stuff, either with a ship or a gun.

Winner

The House of the Dead III

system: **xbox** / developer: **wow entertainment** / publisher: **sega**

There's nothing quite like a well designed light gun game for pure visceral thrills, and Sega's The House of the Dead III is one of the best ever made. Being visually stunning in that special way that only an Xbox game can be made the experience of blasting monsters and zombies almost too intense. It bordered on sensory overload. But most importantly of all, it was the game's design that truly made it an experience worth having. There is more to a good gun game than an endless stream of targets. It's all about the timing, patterns, and the player's directed path through the levels, and in these respects, The House of the Dead III was nearly flawless.



NOTEWORTHY

SubRebellion

playstation 2 / irem

An almost classic shooter, worthy of the Irem name.

Hunter: The Reckoning

xbox / high voltage software / interplay

In the best tradition of Loaded and Smash TV, Hunter: The Reckoning was pure fun.

Fighting

You versus a friend or CPU opponent for close range combat.

Winner

Virtua Fighter 4

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **am2** / publisher: **sega**

Mortal Kombat 4 was an excellent surprise, the stalwart Tekken series has been polished to sparkle, and ... well, the competition does need beefing up (Soul Calibur 2, hello?). For now, Virtua Fighter 4 is our choice for best fighting game this year, an incredibly precise, endlessly deep 3D brawler that takes an esoteric approach to its appeal. Grounded in a more technical, realistic fighting style, Virtua Fighter 4 doesn't use flash and excess as a hook. This series pioneered the 3D fighter, and watching it evolve through the years reveals the best one yet.



NOTEWORTHY

Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters Melee

gamecube / pipeworks software / infogrames

Great multiplayer action and monster selection brought this game to life.

Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance

playstation 2, gamecube, xbox / midway

Can you believe Mortal Kombat is here? Not only is it not crap, it's quite good.

Music/Rhythm

Games requiring the keeping of time with various beats through button presses or acting a fool on a mat.

Gitaroo Man

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **koei** / publisher: **koei**

Pure, wacky delight is a fair way to describe Koei's Gitaroo Man, a truly original music/rhythm experience. As with all games in the genre, this one relied on rhythmically timed button presses, but added the incredibly fun dynamic of using the analog stick to follow a curling path which corresponded to the notes of Gitaroo Man's guitar. Once mastered, this mechanic proved highly addictive, as did the game's completely bizarre sci-fi theme that could only have been dreamt up by a Japanese developer. Big props to Koei for even bringing this game out in the US.



NOTEWORTHY

Rez

playstation 2 / united game artists / sega

Awesome, trippy, and original, Jeff Minter would be proud.

DDR Max

playstation 2 / konami

One of the original, and still one of the best. Get your groove on.

Puzzle

The act of figuring out conundrums through the movement of objects

Winner

Zapper

system: **gamecube** / developer: **blitz games** / publisher: **infogrames**



It took along time for someone to knock Frogger off his stump, but Infogrames' irresistible little cricket turned out to be just the bug to do it. Zapper incorporates everything the genre has become renowned for along with a few new tricks, amidst a soggy arachnid backdrop filled with bizarre bugs and creepy crawlers. Puzzle gaming in the polygonal realm has never looked or played this good. Blitz Games' Team Antics set out

to create the thinking man's twitch game du jour, injecting story that unlocks arcade play, and multiplayer that reeks of elbow grease rather than rehash with Zipperball, Death by Zipper, Death Match, Last Man Standing and Strangle Hold all smashed into the 4 player fun. Multiplayer being the heart of any good puzzler beyond the single player antics, Zapper is the complete package.

NOTEWORTHY

Super Monkey Ball 2

gamecube / amusement vision / sega

A much more balanced and altogether better game than the original.

Super Bust a Move 2

playstation 2, gamecube / taito / ubi soft

This timeless idea will always be fun, no matter how many times you've played it.

Simulation

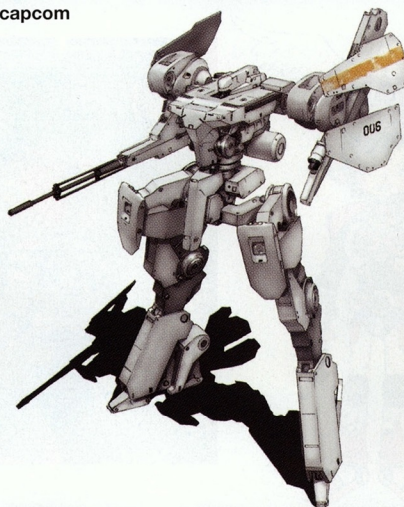
Reality or strategy takes precedence over immediate satisfaction, with deep gameplay possibilities.

Winner

Steel Battalion

system: **xbox** / developer: **capcom** / publisher: **capcom**

By any normal measure, Capcom's Steel Battalion was an exercise in overkill. The controller was an expensive monster, and the game was riddled with complexities that only a true lover of Japanese mechs could appreciate. And yet, it somehow worked. The game's almost fetishistic approach to mech combat and the undoubted feeling of empowerment created by the big, bulky controller coalesced into a heightened experience not to be missed by those who can afford it (or even find it at this point, so limited was the run). More than any game this year, playing Steel Battalion afforded a feeling of accomplishment when played well.



NOTEWORTHY

Dynasty Tactics

playstation 2 / koei

A unique effort from Koei as they attempt to bridge the gap between genres.

Romance of the Three Kingdoms VII

playstation 2 / koei

A game of incredible depth and strategy, but only for the hard core.

Extreme Sports

Any sport existing outside the accepted norm, or a gross exaggeration thereof.

Winner

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4

system: **playstation 2, gamecube, xbox** / developer: **neversoft** / publisher: **activision**

No alternative sports game has been able to even come close to steeling Tony's Hawk's golden thunder, and every new addition to the series is much better than the last. Now we're up to part four, easily the deepest, best-looking, most sickly addictive Hawk yet. Hawk 4 initially feels familiar: skate around, do tricks, score points, love the perfect feel and precision, live the skills of a top-notch skater. But quickly you begin to see how this game is even more than an expectedly polished update. No other Hawk has been able to capture this sweet immersion into a skate-

culture-bound setting, where you find an incredible new freedom to the objectives. The things you have to do are seemingly endless, giving the game a depth that is matchless. Taking away the constrictive time limits does wonders to the game, forcing the designers to go for more creative ways of engaging your master skill level (love the little touches like a tennis match to break up the action) And with the copious licensed music, endless options, humorous real-life references, tons of levels, and awesome level design. Nothing short of dominance.



NOTEWORTHY

FreeStyle

playstation 2, gamecube / page 44 studios / ea big

What EA did so well with snowboarding in SSX, they did to the world of motocross.

Sega Soccer Slam

gamecube, xbox, playstation 2 / visual concepts / sega

Hilarious, over the top arcade style game of no-rules soccer

Racing

Like it says, just pure racing.

Sega GT 2002

system: **xbox** / developer: **wow entertainment** / publisher: **sega**



Sega GT2002 did the two things it needed to succeed: look great, play even better.

Originality didn't factor much into the brief for Sega GT2002, but it suffered not. This was one sterling racing title that wore its inspiration on its sleeve. While some might argue that it didn't have the spark or the hint of magic that Gran Turismo had, no one can deny the sheer competence on display in Sega GT2002, as it went through its motions with incredible polish and aplomb. The graphics were beyond reproach, with the kind of tiny detailing that used to be the province of high-powered PCs, and the control and basic racing action were both top notch, which made the game as good to look at as it was to play.

NOTEWORTHY

Ferrari F355 Challenge

playstation 2 / am2 / sega

Probably the best physics engine any racing game has ever had.

V-Rally 3

playstation 2 / eden studios / infogrames

A terrific rally game with superb graphics, great play, and marvelous soundtrack.

Based on TV/Movie

A game based on a movie or television series, obviously.

Winner

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers

system: **playstation 2, xbox** / developer: **ea** / publisher: **ea**

No one wants games to become movies. Gameplay has to be a focus, and no matter how gorgeous games continue to become, your command of the character must be interesting and engaging. But there has to be a concession: cinematic qualities are a natural fit for a compelling gaming experience, and a game will always benefit from a keen, inventive blending of traditional structure and visual storytelling. Lord of the Rings: the Two Towers showed just how elegantly the two artforms can come together for extraordinary impact. Here is a game that would, admittedly, not thrill with its gameplay alone—a frenetic path of sword slashing and arrow

piercing that gets crowded with monsters in daunting numbers. But capture the soaring spirit of the movie on which the game is drawn, and the game immediately became a more compelling experience.

The presentation was a spectacular achievement, blending scenes from the movie and the game with an awesome naturalism. Sometimes you're caught off guard when the game actually does move from watching to playing, and I'm not just referring to the easy addition of cuts from the film. The game became its own movie, telling the same majestic tone story with extraordinary sights and sounds. Many of the film's

indelible qualities were siphoned into the game environment, but while Lord of the Rings did benefit from the movie wellspring it draws from—how blessed EA is to have access to these character designs—its laudable strength was the inspired craftsmanship that went in to making a game out of it all. Voices were rerecorded, the soundtrack was layered straight from the film, the visual spectacle was insane, the pacing and staging of it all an awesome display. That the incessant action was properly handled and the journey didn't get stale—a simple level up and superbly executed weapons system staved off monotony—closed the deal.

NOTEWORTHY

Buffy the Vampire Slayer

xbox / the collective / fox interactive

Great show leads to great game with great graphics and great combat. Great!

Treasure Planet

playstation 2 / bizarre creations / disney interactive

Could it be? A game that's actually better than the movie it's based on? Yep.

Online

Any game that can be played online, of course.

2002

Winner

Phantasy Star Online Episode 1 & 2

system: **gamecube** / developer: **sonic team** / publisher: **sega**

Online gaming is certainly nothing new. PC gamers know this, and braver console players will certainly have been online since the 16-bit Xband and the Sega Saturn's NetLink. Sega was again the first to make a big push with the Dreamcast and achieved a fair level of success, but it wasn't until this year that online play was really targeted at the masses, with all three super consoles going online.

It's slightly ironic then that the console with the most nebulous online policy should also host our favorite online game of the year, Sonic Team's Phantasy Star Online Episode 1 & 2. It's the only game available for online play on Nintendo's Gamecube, and the only one for the foreseeable future, but based on our experience with the game, it should last until the next one comes out.

In short, this is one supremely addictive game. It's quite easy to log well over a hun-

dred hours in the game and still not be tired of it. How can this be? Credit an incredibly rewarding character level-up system along with the allure of rare and powerful items which can only be found on the hard difficulties. Throw in the obviously addictive nature of playing online with friends and strangers from around the world and you have a recipe for many sleepless nights.

For those who played the life out of Phantasy Star Online on Dreamcast, don't think that there is nothing new for you here. The GameCube version not only boasts slightly enhanced graphics but the all new Episode 2, which has some of the best looking environments we've ever seen.

The biggest problem with PSO is that once it gets its claws into you, it won't let go until you've finished the game on Ultimate difficulty, and even then, you'll probably be coming back for more. Now, if only ASCII would bring out their keyboard...



NOTEWORTHY



SOCOM: U.S. Navy Seals

ps2 / zipper interactive / sony

SOCOM was a deeply addicting play experience, utilizing equal measures of team strategy and straightforward action. Very satisfying to play.



MechAssault

xbox / day 1 studios / microsoft

One of the most intense online console experiences to date, MechAssault literally assaults the senses with explosive graphics and intense online combat.

by tom ham

Football Winner

NFL 2K3

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube** / developer: **visual concepts** / publisher: **sega sports**

To put it simply, NFL 2K3 kicked some major ass this year. The game has been tuned and tweaked to perfection. Combining brilliant AI, top-notch gameplay and killer visuals, NFL 2K3 continued to raise the bar among football titles. Sega did an incredible job of seamlessly integrating the ESPN license into the game. From the intro from Dan Patrick to the ESPN analysis of the teams before a game, it all fit quite nicely. 2K3 also sported a totally revamped Franchise mode making it the most in-depth and comprehensive of the bunch. In addition, Sega brought NFL 2K3 online and the end result was nothing short of brilliant. With numerous gameplay lobbies across the country, finding someone to play with is a breeze. What set Sega's game apart from the rest is the phenomenal control, especially in the running game. Without question, NFL 2K3 is the best football game out there.

Football Runner Up

Madden NFL 2003

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube, pc** / developer: **ea sports** / publisher: **ea sports**

On the flip side, if players were looking for the ultimate in presentation and extras, then Madden NFL 2003 was your game. With the addition of Al Michaels providing commentary and John Madden providing his snippets of knowledge here and there, you'd think you were watching a real game. Other key features included the Create-A-Playbook where armchair coaches could customize receiver routes and player formations. Madden NFL 2003 also supported online gameplay (only on PS2). Players were able to go into a game lobby, chat and then launch

a game immediately. Rather painless. New to 2003 included new gang tackles, sidearm QBs and cheerleader half-time shows, yet the game's best feature was the fantastic Mini-Camp mode where players could practice various drills and situations. Other games attempted practice modes, but Mini-Camp is clearly the winner. Where Madden fumbled the ball is flow. The game was a little slow when compared to Sega's.

Basketball Winner

NBA Live 2003

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube, pc** / developer: **ea sports** / publisher: **ea sports**

After a truly disappointing showing last year, EA Sports went back to the drawing board and brought the popular NBA series back on top of the competition. For 2003, EA Sports debuted its ingenious Freestyle control. Without question, this will change the way everyone plays basketball games. Trust me, when you play a game that doesn't have it, you'll wonder how you could've played without it. Moves like palming the ball, step-back moves and shoulder fakes—it's all possible with freestyle control. And when used in conjunction with the left movement stick, players are able to perform post-up moves and drive the lane with incredible flair. Think you got skills? Then go online with the PS2 version and see who rules the court (sorry, no Xbox Live support). When you throw in outstanding player animations, signature moves and the best game soundtrack around, NBA Live 2003 is the best basketball game this year. Period.

Basketball Runner Up

NBA 2K3

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube** / developer: **visual concepts** / publisher: **sega sports**

Sega has made an indelible mark in the industry with their Sega Sports brand and for years, their NBA games have been consistently the best on the consoles—with awesome level of detail for the players, the sweet street ball game and, of course, flawless online gameplay. However, this year, EA Sports took it up a notch with their incredible Freestyle Control. Other than some aesthetic changes (namely the ESPN license) and new player animations, NBA 2K3 played almost identically

to last year's game. Sure we were able to pass with the right analog stick but where's the innovation in that? On the flip side, Sega did have some highlights to this year's game, namely their Franchise mode. Definitely the best of the lot, it was extremely comprehensive and the highlight of the game. The visuals were also top notch. Although some of the animations were a bit awkward (passing), the player models themselves were some of the best we've seen this year.



Sega wins the football race this year with NFL 2K3, while EA takes the basketball with NBA Live 2003

Soccer Winner

FIFA 2003

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube, pc** / developer: **ea sports** / publisher: **ea sports**

With every iteration of their FIFA soccer game, EA Sports always manage to turn up the realism level that much more and their latest is no exception. In fact, FIFA 2003 is almost too realistic. With a totally revamped engine, the opponents in FIFA 2003 almost rival real life players. Specializing in three distinct areas of play—teampay, team tactics and real player attributes—this is the most realistic soccer game ever created. Ball control is also improved as well. To make it more realistic, players have to consistently make adjustments as they are running with it. The same applies to shooting and passing. FIFA 2003 boasts over 10,000 players and 450 teams and just as always, each player plays according to their real life counterpart. Graphically, this year's FIFA raises the bar once again. New player animations are silky smooth and we have yet to see better crowd movements in a soccer game.

Soccer Runner Up

World Tour Soccer 2002

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **scee** / publisher: **989 sports**

Surprising all of us was 989 Sports' soccer game. If anyone has a chance of taking out FIFA from the top, this game might be able to do so down the road. World Tour Soccer 2002 was feature-rich but graphics-poor compared with FIFA. It offered five gameplay modes, including Quick Game, Exhibition, National Season, Special Competition and International Competition. Impressive was World Tour's inclusion of more than 300 teams in 11 leagues, but its best feature was its gameplay. Just about anyone could pick up the controller and get

going with this title. Passing and shooting were easy to execute properly, and the computer-controlled players were uncommonly smart. Goalies knew when to rush a forward with the ball, and a fullback would kick a ball out of bounds to prevent a scoring attempt. But the visuals lacked the polish of EA's effort. World Tour's stadiums are sharply rendered, but the players in them look average at best, with blocky animations and mostly expressionless faces.

Golf Winner

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2003

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube, pc** / developer: **ea sports** / publisher: **ea sports**

Leave it EA to bring out the best golf game this year. With the success of Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2002, the 2003 game showcased new courses, new characters and of course, the same great gameplay mechanics. Utilizing the Total Precision Swing system, players could direct direction, downswing, backswing and even how much the ball sliced. The game offered the usual array of modes, but the PLAY NOW mode is where most gamers spent most of their time. Here players were given 50 scenarios where they had to play out the situation to the best of their ability. PGA Tour 2003 also offered an online component where players could post their stats and records and compare them with other players around the world. The graphics were also top notch. From the detailed courses to the golfers themselves, for the ultimate in golf action, look no further than Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2003.

Golf Runner Up

Hot Shots Golf 3

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **clap hanz limited** / publisher: **scea**

Taking a little more casual approach to the sport of golf is Hot Shots Golf 3. Utilizing the standard three-click mechanic for drives and two-clicks for putts, the control was easy enough for anyone to pick up and play. There were three main gameplay modes in Hot Shot Golf 3: single player, multiplayer and short course. Although it was fun playing against a friend, most of your time was spent in single-player mode. Here modes such as Stroke Play and Tournament became available. Visually, Hot Shots Golf 3 still maintained the same look and

feel of previous games in the series. Where the courses were rendered realistically, the players themselves were incredibly deformed (in a cartoonish sort of way). Our biggest complaint, however, was the lack of detail for each of the characters. It would've been nice to have seen more transitional animations instead of just the limited few that are in the game.

Tennis Winner

Sega Sports Tennis

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube** / developer: **hitmaker** / publisher: **sega sports**

If there was ever poetry in motion for a sports video-game, it would have to be Sega Sports Tennis. First seen on the Dreamcast and now ported over to the PS2, this is the definitive tennis videogame. Although simple in scope and control, this skill-based game will reward you for consistent play and penalize you if you get sloppy. There are three gameplay modes including Exhibition, Tournament and World Tour. World Tour is where you'll spend most of your time. Players can create a player model and then compete around the world, earning cash prizes that can be used to buy clothes, gear and expert tennis instruction. Creative mini-games teach beginners the fundamentals as well as giving advanced players additional strategies. Graphically, no other game can touch it. The colors are rich and the textures are nicely detailed. The player animations themselves are also incredibly realistic. You will not find a better tennis game than this.

Tennis Runner Up

Smash Court Tennis Pro Tournament

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **namco** / publisher: **namco**

Although Sega managed to steal the limelight with their near flawless tennis game, Namco surprisingly pulled out an ace they had up their sleeve with Smash Court Tennis Pro Tournament. Granted the game wasn't as polished as Sega's but it definitely showed that there was enough room in this industry for two tennis games. The main draw of Namco's game was the incredibly deep and widely recognized roster. Unlike Sega's game where only the most die-hard of tennis fan would know who all the players were, Namco had players like

Monica Seles, Anna Kournikova, Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras. Similar to Sega's World Tour, the Pro Tournament mode was equally fun and addictive. Unfortunately, where Smash Court Tennis Pro Tournament double faulted was in the area of the visuals. Even though the player models looked excellent, textures were lackluster and the animations weren't up to par with Sega's game. A great effort by Namco, we look forward to what they come up with this year.



Of course, FIFA 2003 takes soccer honors this year, and even though it came second, Namco's Smash Court certainly looked classy



Baseball Winner

All Star Baseball 2003

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube** / developer: **acclaim austin** / publisher: **acclaim sports**

2002 truly saw some great baseball games and the best one was Acclaim's All-Star Baseball 2003. Although the game was not as realistic as High Heat Baseball 2003, the gameplay modes alone more than made up for it. Players were treated to a full-on Career mode that included all the minor leagues as well. In addition, the game allowed for computer trades, rookie signings, free agents and Hall of Fame players. But what truly set All-Star Baseball 2003 apart from other baseball games was an Expansion mode. Here players got to create teams from the beginning and expand their league. Other key features included accurate play-by-play commentary that not only kept up with the action, but also gave historical information about the players and the game. Granted the overall graphical quality wasn't as sharp as EA's Triple Play, the animations were still quite good and very realistic.

Baseball Runner Up

High Heat Baseball 2003

system: **playstation 2, pc** / developer: **3do** / publisher: **3do**

3DO has built a reputation of putting out the most realistic baseball games with their High Heat series. Unlike other companies that concentrate on visuals, High Heat puts its energies on the fundamentals that make a great baseball game. One of High Heat's strongest areas was in gameplay modes—over eight including Exhibition, Playoffs, Home Run Derby, Fantasy Draft and an incredibly deep Season Mode. Players could track stats in more than 20 different categories. There was also a

Create-A-Player mode that wasn't too shabby. Another key feature was the realism. Players performed just like their real-life counterpart. If a player was a heavy hitter in real life, then he will hit accordingly in the game unlike other baseball games where having a good twitch finger could help an average hitter become a slugger. Although the visuals didn't match its competitors, it still managed to hold well enough on its own.

Hockey Winner

NHL 2K3

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube** / developer: **visual concepts** / publisher: **sega sports**

Showing that Sega can also compete on the ice is NHL 2K3, our pick for best hockey game of 2002. With new gameplay modes, improved visuals and the best AI around, this is NHL action at its finest. New for 2003 is the addition of a Franchise Mode. Here armchair managers can adjust rosters, trade players, sign free agents—whatever they want to do. A new Sega Sports Challenge feature also allows players to compare their stats online with others around the world. But the best part of NHL 2K3 is by far the AI. It truly is eerie how the AI players now exactly what is going on in the rink. They will anticipate passes, shots on goal and even penalize you on purpose to disrupt a play. Although the graphics aren't as smooth and refined as EA's hockey title, they get the job done nevertheless.

Hockey Runner Up

NHL 2003

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube, pc** / developer: **ea sports** / publisher: **ea sports**

For the most part, NHL 2003 is almost identical to NHL 2002, which is great news for hockey fans. 2003 is all about customization. Players can control every rule and option, create any type of player and change rosters as they see fit. Whether you're a hardcore player or a casual one, NHL 2003 has you covered. Another key feature is the Deke Control System. Much like Live's Freestyle control, it allows players to execute fake shots, trick shots and even pass the puck around a

defender. From a visual standpoint, NHL 2003 left the competition in the dust. Everything from the individual player animations to the particle effects on the ice to the various goalie movements, it was all incredible. Thanks to DTS support, the sound was also top notch. Online gameplay? Sorry folks, only Sega's NHL 2K3 has online gameplay (on Xbox). Hopefully EA will have it in next year's game.

Overall

2002

Excellence within specific categories, overall winners deserve singular praise.

Music

Rygar

system: ps2 / developer: tecmo / publisher: tecmo

Music rarely receives the kind of attention it deserves when being placed into a video game. Most the time we get assembly line simplicity and transparent monotony layered over the visuals, where full, rich composition should exist to support and embellish. In the case of the awesome Rygar, however, an elegant, gorgeous score took the game even farther into its ethereal space. Play this game without such a supportive background of atmospheric music and the effect would be diminished more than you might think. And big props to Tecmo for caring enough to see the significance of placing the compositions in the hands of the Moscow International Symphony Orchestra, who gave the sound a surreal, open and at times epic-feeling quality. From its technical strength to the appeal of a live orchestra, Rygar's music towered over everything around it.

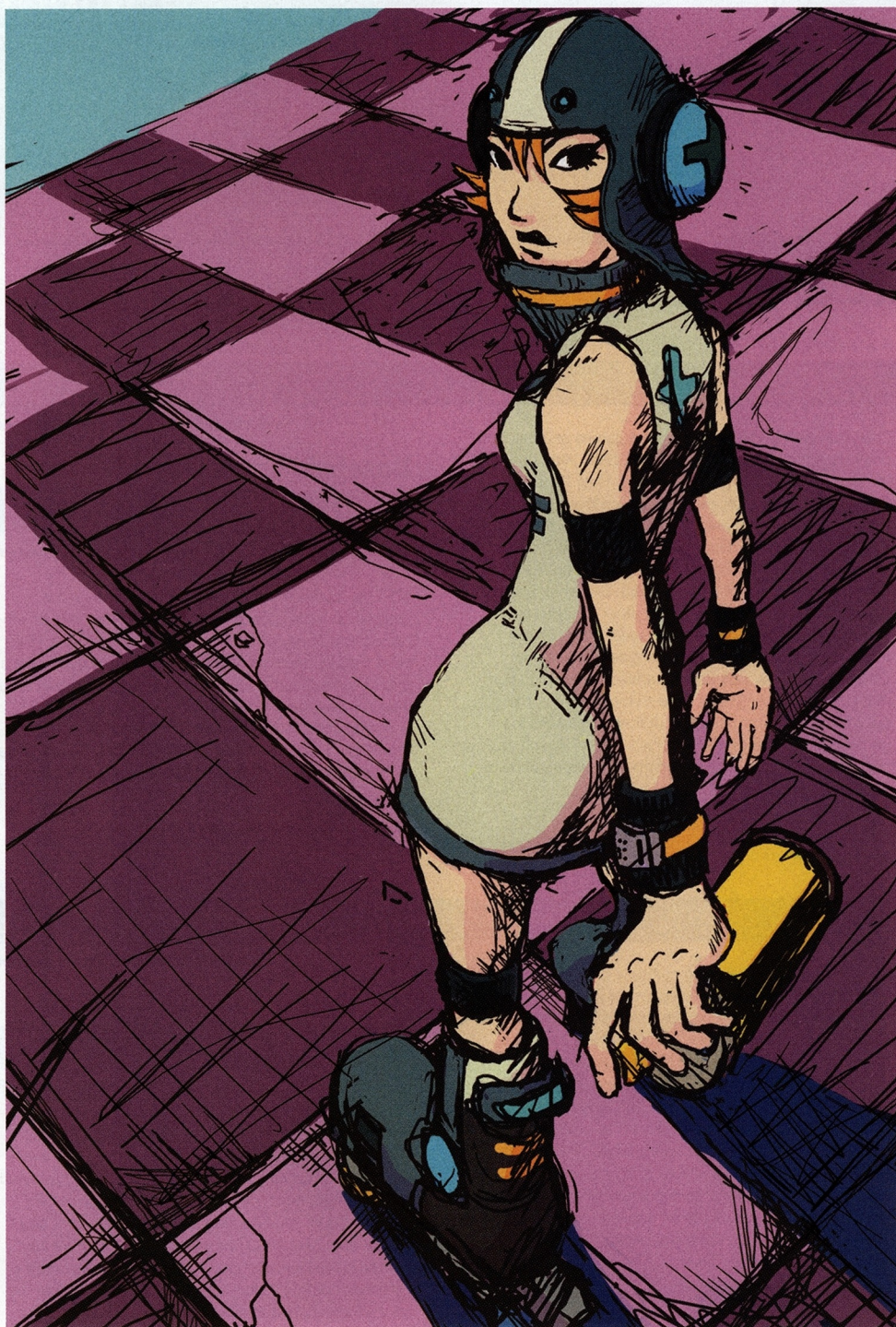


Writing

Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem

system: gc / developer: silicon knights / publisher: nintendo

Eternal Darkness swept us into a mystical universe of death and decay, but its power came just as much from the superb writing as the disturbing, dark imagery. In a game where spiraling into the abyss of hallucination and insanity became the many protagonists' destiny, a vacuous, contrived tale would have killed the mood; this psychological thriller breathed in death, and you could feel the rotting air with every word that was spoken. Even the title itself, Sanity's Requiem, has a spooky weight to it. It could be said that the game toyed with lavish extremes, but that was part of the idea. Bold and fascinating, Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem's storytelling succeeded in every way it was intended. How refreshing to see a word like "oppugning" sneaking into a video game. Eternal Darkness shows that fine writing can make a huge difference to a game's effect.



Jet Set Radio Future wins the honor this year for best art direction. It's easy to see why.

CG

Onimusha 2

system: ps2 / developer: capcom / publisher: capcom

We knew when we first saw Onimusha 2's glorious intro that it would be in the running for this year's best CG work, and here it sits at the top. Created by ROBOT, the elaborately staged opening cinema, first showing the destruction of a village by a horde of horse-riding demons, and then flowing into this beautiful, abstract character introduction completely captivated us. The style was completely unique, playing out as some kind of impossibly ambitious Asian theater production. It was this element of the fantastic which elevated Onimusha's CG over everything else this year, even Resident Evil.

**Art Direction****Jet Set Radio Future**

system: xb / developer: smilebit / publisher: sega

Leaping from the adjacent overpass onto the massive neon dragon that twists up the tower that pierces the neon sky above 99th street, I give an inner shout out to Smilebit for designing a metropolis so desirable I've taken up residence, and to the game's musical director for setting it to a soundtrack I like so much it's in my shower CD player. At the core of Smilebit's beat breaking, wall tagging, jet blading, platforming, action-rpg is a bustling universe without compare. Smilebit's version of Tokyo makes Vice City look like a postage stamp. In Shibuya Terminal hundreds of pedestrians mill about, all stylishly diverse. A few urban sprawls away the Sky Dinosaurian Square offers a massive twisting roller coaster intertwined through skyscrapers so enormous it takes minutes just to wrap your brain around its sheer magnitude. Not far off, the quiet solace of working the pipeline in the Tokyo Underground Sewage facility beckons, less than a mile from platforming that defies your potential in the Fortified Residential Zone. JSRF is a picture of contrast in gameplay and art styles, before you even consider the liquid cool characters that set the cel-shaded standard like Gum, Beat, Clutch, Corn, Soda, Rhyth, Jazz, Yoyo and on and on... JSRF is an achievement in style equal to its technological prowess and spectacular gameplay. Sega may say they don't condone real life acts of vandalism under any circumstances, but I'll bet they'd like to tag anyone who said JSRF was anything less than spectacular.



Two great harbingers of style in 2002 were Capcom's Onimusha 2 and Sega's Gungrave

Best Character Design**Gungrave**

system: ps2 / developer: red ent. / publisher: sega

Among Sega's arsenal of high powered imports like Shinobi, Panzer Dragoon Orta, Phantasy Star Online, and Jet Set Radio Future, all of which possess style that matches or exceeds their considerable substance, one game in particular is the embodiment of it, Red's Gungrave. Character designs and original animation from Yasuhiro Naito, creator of the hit anime series TRIGUN, are the catalyst for arcade action orchestrated with the gentle caress of a steamroller. Grave's revenge comes by way of a coffin chained to his deadness from which he dispenses all manner of sudden death syndrome. Lumbering, bent like a wet cigarette dangling two massive pistols at head height, he's so cool that in Japan his hyper-detailed action figure was included in a special-edition box, the same figure Sega sent select press along with signed artwork and a coffin shaped wallet... that's character design, celebrated, respected, and a big part of why we love Sega so much.

Best Character Female

Kelly O'Lenmey GunValkyrie

system: xb / developer: smilebit / publisher: sega

Underneath her Gearskin, Kelly possesses a soft warm beauty accented by golden blonde hair, milky white skin, and a perfect body. Glimpses of her bare back and creamy thighs grace GunValkyrie between stages, but otherwise she's seen by the player as an instrument to dispense pain and hover gracefully out of harm's way. What makes Kelly so special is an allure so magnetic it manages to shine through when the armor's on. Exquisite animation and meticulous model making are to thank, along with a female template only the Japanese can seem to bring into the virtual realm. And yes, I'm aware that I need therapy.



Best Character Male

Hotsuma Shinobi

system: ps2 / developer: overworks / publisher: sega

Hotsuma was drawn to be a bad-ass Ninja, spirited and lethal, swift and imposing. Look at him move, the way he appears to skim the surface, tracking across walls and ledges—his presence is awesome. Look at him, and you have to control him. Of course, anyone who commanded this incredible, nimble character in Shinobi cannot deny the ultimate impact of his design—that flowing, delicate, gorgeously animated scarf that never failed to impress.



Best Character Other

Blinx

system: **xb** / developer: **artoon** / publisher: **microsoft**

It's unanimous, Naoto Ohshima's fat cat from outer (or is it inner) space is the crème de la critter for 2002. Let's review: Polished steel-toed white boots, trumpet-shaped where Blinx' spindly legs jettison, bright red pants, thick white ski gloves, a shiny blue turtleneck with one massive gold button, shiny aviator goggles worn on the head only, and a vacuum (okay, Time Sweeper)... all on a vague facsimile of the fat cat from Alice in Wonderland with a freaky waddle and cheshire grin. Now that's a critter. E-yuh-fah!



What a strange and wonderful character this Blinx



Character Models

Enclave

system: **xb** / developer: **starbreeze** / publisher: **conspiracy**

The art of sculpting polygonal models is a craft of varying degrees of skill, measured by the number of polygons at the designer's disposal. For instance, the models in Treasure's Sin and Punishment are few in polygons but so wonderfully imagined they look far better than many utilizing 10 times as many or more. Models are as much about design as execution, and in Enclave, they are the epitome of both. The assailants in this game—berserker's, assassin's, bombardiers and goblins—are such that if you saw one coming at you, you would soil pant, and the knights, wizards, huntress', druids, engineers and Half-lings are equally stunning medieval beings that become increasingly so as you heap on steel. I often wonder if the artisans responsible at Starbreeze Studios are part blacksmith; what stunning work they have done.

Level Design

Super Mario Sunshine

system: **gc** / developer: **nintendo** / publisher: **nintendo**

It was a close call between Super Mario Sunshine and Metroid Prime for best level design of the year, but in the end, it went to Mario for one reason: complexity of play mechanics. No doubt, Metroid Prime's level layout was brilliant, a marvel of three dimensional design. But Samus was limited in her movements, whereas Mario has a staggering range of speeds and jumping and floating actions, making designing levels around these mechanics an incredibly difficult task. But it was pulled off beautifully, and the end result is some of the most addictive 3D play ever conceived.

Voice Acting

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City

system: ps2 / developer: rockstar north / publisher: rockstar

Luckily for GTA Vice City, Primal's not 'til next year. In the meantime, any game with Burt Reynolds, Ray Liotta, and Dennis Hopper is pure gold as far as we're concerned. We don't care if they're barking out soup recipes, these dudes is cool! If you're wondering why GTA Vice City isn't spread all over these awards like so much plasma, it's mainly because this was such a rich year for hard-core action and adventure. Vice City's everyman appeal and familiar feel knocked it just south of everyone's ten best. Rockstar deserves major props though for delivering such a solid game so quickly after GTA III's super-hyper-mega success.

Special Effects

Metroid Prime

system: gc / developer: retro studios / publisher: nintendo

And here we are again: Metroid Prime dominates another category, showing technical mastery as skilled as its artistry. It broke ground in a number of areas, and the use of convincing, scintillating effects was not always the most noticeable accomplishment, but that's exactly why it succeeded on such a grand scale. Little details filled the screen. Attention to the finer touches, like fogging, condensation, weather and particles were as subtle as they were in your face. Toward the later levels, the impact of the effects system became even more impressive, with explosions and such highlights as the thermal and x-ray scanning pounding the visual spectacle even harder.

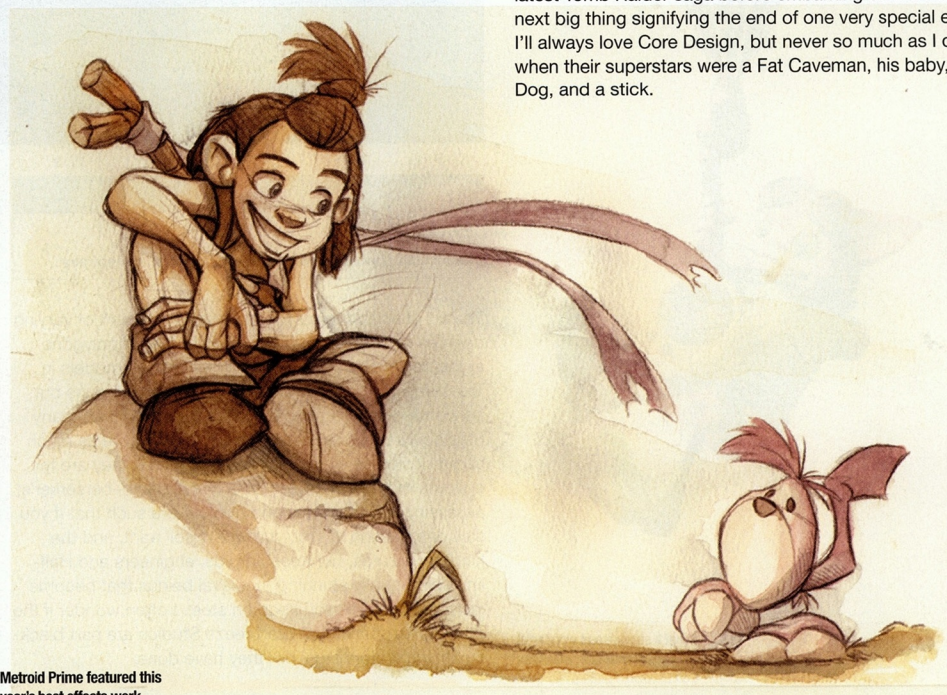


Most Innovative

Blinx: The Time Sweeper

system: xb / developer: artoon / publisher: microsoft

It came down to herding Doops or manipulating time, but this is the year of the cat -- Naoto Ohshima's cat. "Blinx is a game where you can control time as you would operating a VCR in real-time. This has enabled us to provide an experience like no other action game before." No truer words have ever been spoken. Creating his Sonic for the Xbox, Ohshima stayed true to his ten-minute roots but broke the mold otherwise, and in the process of working together with a team of 30 at Artoon, created the year's coolest creature and the single most innovative play mechanic in the rather thin annals of 3D platforming. Having environments crumble only to ride them in rewind and the like: brilliant.



Metroid Prime featured this year's best effects work



Most Underrated

Herdy Gerdy

system: ps2 / developer: core / publisher: eidos

Back before Lara was queen of the world, Core Design made a living creating platformers starring quirky cartoon characters like Chuck Rock, Son of Chuck, and Wonderdog (shit, I'm welling up) and the odd action puzzler like Bubba 'n Stix (find it, love it). Next they found shooting, then isometric action, and ultimately the twin Tetons, but what defined them was a sparkling wit and an eye for design that exemplified fun. I used to joke with Jeremy and Adrian Smith about "Herdy Gerdy" (which was always a working title) back before the Saturn was born. It was the one secret project they wouldn't disclose and the game that would turn the world on its ear. Too bad between then and now the world (of gaming) changed and a beautiful game swept quietly by, met with mixed reviews. Speaking with Jeremy earlier this year he spoke of nixing Chuck Rock 3D... (welling up again) and buttoning up the latest Tomb Raider saga before embarking on the next, next big thing signifying the end of one very special era. I'll always love Core Design, but never so much as I did when their superstars were a Fat Caveman, his baby, a Dog, and a stick.

Blinx: The Time Sweeper and Herdy Gerdy were two of the most original games of the year

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Game Boy Advance

2002

Nintendo's portable juggernaut reached an all time software high and sailed beyond the ten-million mark, even though you still can't see it!

The Game Boy Advance has become somewhat of an enigma. The harbinger of AAA classics and perpetrator of 2D still manages to exist under clouds of scrutiny—namely, why it isn't backlit. They say battery life, but we all know that's a load of Yoshi dung. The lights that we are left to buy, most of which fetch about a dollar in China, chew up battery life worse than the system itself, by either draining your onboard supply, or require juice of

their own... Ten-million strong and growing and Nintendo can't design a light? And how about some quality control? There's a GBA game for every day of the year, many of which should never see the light of day. Getting shelf space for a GBA title has become an exercise in licensing rather than quality, leaving the market in complete disarray. Magazines barely cover GBA because the soft market means there's no ad money, and the beat goes

on surrounding the most successful console in existence, the cornerstone of Nintendo's enterprise. That exclaimed, mine rarely leaves my side, even though I need a semi to carry all the stupid lights I've amassed. Arriving this year, the TV link will certainly help matters, but we all know the true path to portable enlightenment leads to a backlit GBA. With software like this available the sooner the better.

The GBA Top 10

- 01 The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past
- 02 Metroid Fusion
- 03 Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance
- 04 Yoshi's Island: Super Mario Advance 3
- 05 Mega Man Zero
- 06 Super Ghouls'n Ghosts
- 07 Super Mario World: Super Mario Advance 2
- 08 Lunar Legend
- 09 Tactics Ogre: The Knight of Lodis
- 10 Kirby: Nightmare in Dreamland



Action

Metroid Fusion

developer: nintendo / publisher: nintendo

2002 was the year of the Metroid (even if it is a slimy life-sucking xenomorph) as Samus touched down twice in one glorious quarter. In Fusion, Samus' life is ironically saved by a Metroid cell after she's exposed to a mysterious new strain, an organism capable of duplicating its host's DNA, among other things. Back on SR388 trouble is afoot and classic Metroid ensues, fused with beautiful new 2D art, legendary boss encounters, and a new and improved Samus equipped like never before. Another Nintendo game for the ages—classic Metroid lives.

Noteworthy

Castlevania Harmony of Dissonance
Yoshi's Island

Role Playing

The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past

developer: nintendo / publisher: nintendo

I still can't believe this game is here: The single greatest overhead action-RPG ever created in the palm of your hand, let alone packing Four Swords, a brand new four-player cooperative game all its own. Unlike many SNES ports the retelling here is one hundred percent faithful, down to the last note, no remixing required. Who can ever forget the crackling storm and pouring rain that began it all, and the fleshing out of Zelda's NES-style dungeons in 16-bit. Pure Nintendo gold, handheld game of the year.

Noteworthy

Lunar Legend
Mega Man Battle Network 2

Movie/TV Based

Treasure Planet

developer: bizarre creations / publisher: disney interactive

Isometric action fans, at least what's left of them, have waited a long time for someone to knock-off the amazing play style of Climax's legendary 16-bit masterwork, LandStalker. And while the last place I thought I'd find it was in Disney's Treasure Planet, here it is, top of the heap. It's not the game LandStalker was—nothing ever will be, but it's intentions are the same. My apologies if you expected Spider-Man; admittedly the game looks a smash but it's a bit of a mess otherwise. Treasure Planet is the place you wanna be. Kim's nice to warm up with as well.

Noteworthy

Kim Possible
Kong the Animated Series

Sports

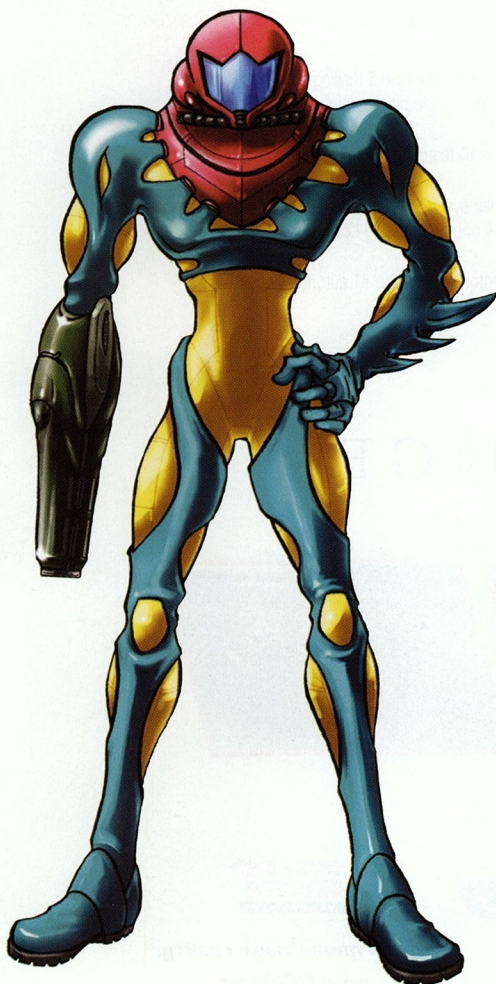
Tony Hawk Pro Skater 4

developer: vicarious visions / publisher: activision

Animation like this in a top-down skater game is just wrong. TH4 wins this award before the first grind. While each area does play with your mind, as you struggle to distinguish depth amongst like color schemes, it's well worth the trial and error, seeing as how the payoff is a mini shred session with looks to kill and, thanks to the GBA's inability to playback MTV retreads, lyric-free sessions.

Noteworthy

Davis Cup Tennis
FIFA 2003



Some of the best Game Boy Advance games of the year, clockwise from top left: Metroid Fusion, Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance, Star X, Treasure Planet, Yoshi's Island, and Super Mario World



FPS

Ballistic Ecks vs. Sever

developer: **crawfish interactive** / publisher: **bam! ent.**

Dated 3D corridor play akin to the 32X will never be my bag, but if you don't mind a face full of pixels, Ballistic Ecks vs. Sever is your game du jour. I don't know what the Eck went wrong in the first installment but part two borders on acceptable first-person shooting on a handheld, something I never expected. Duke's a close second here and Doom a distant third, but the way I see it, you really only need one of these, and Ballistic does it best, unless of course you like it nasty, then Duke's your man.

Noteworthy

Duke Nukem Adv.
Doom II

Shooting

Star X

developer: **graphic state** / publisher: **bam! entertainment**

The 2D formula shooter that borrows from Gradius and R-Type, or the Starfox clone? The Starfox clone of course. Even with its slightly hazy control scheme, one must ponder and then conclude that with its free-roaming levels mixed in (something Starfox didn't have), blissful music, and overall polygonal integrity, Star X is one of the year's very best GBA games, and the best polygonal handheld game ever. In a world where 3D shooters are as scarce as leftovers at Anna Nicole Smith's house, Star X is a game to covet.

Noteworthy

Phalanx
Monster Force

Racing

V Rally 3

developer: **velez & dubail** / publisher: **infogrames**

After last issue's console race, VR3 and Colin McRae duke it out yet again, only this time VR3 comes out the victor. There's just no denying this game's unbelievable 3D engine and cockpit view. Although McRae has real-time dirt accumulation and wicked physics (I know, crazy, huh), it can't top a GBA racer that looks as good as Daytona did on Saturn—no lie.

Noteworthy

Colin McRae Rally 2.0
Motocross Maniacs Advance

Fighting

Street Fighter II Turbo Revival

developer: **capcom** / publisher: **capcom**

Revival is the glory days of coin-op shoehorned into a handheld (sans six-button control), so stock up on batteries. It all comes rushing back: standing at the 7-Eleven studying every frame, getting my ass kicked by Nick Rox.... Fighting games may have moved-on but there's something generational about Turbo that I'll never get over, or maybe that's just Cammy's ass again. The remixed music takes some getting used to and there's the smallest hint of slow down when things get especially manic, but this game delivered this pristine to a handheld, is simply a gift. Alpha 3's as epic a portable powerhouse so choose accordingly. Sometimes nostalgia feels especially good, this is one of those times.

Noteworthy

SF Alpha 3
GGX adv Ed.

Puzzle

Bomberman Max 2

developer: **hudson** / publisher: **majesco**

This was a tight race and I'm still not sure that Rampage doesn't deserve the nod. Majesco was wise to acquire Hudson's Bomberman Max 2, the crown jewel in the franchises portable lot. Not only is it the best-looking game in the series, but it affords single and multi-cart link-play and a few welcome twists to the very tried and very true B-Man formula, like co-op play between Max and Bomber and some cool two-legged beasts to ride.

Noteworthy

Rampage Puzzle Attack
Planet Monsters



Game of the Year: Console Specific

Microsoft Xbox

GunValkyrie

developer: smilebit / publisher: sega

"I began to build a stack of games that had a profound effect on me; GunValkyrie was at the top of that stack."

Sitting down to gather my thoughts and dig into this year's revelry, I began by piling up stacks of games for each platform that I deemed worthy of an award in their respective categories. As each one grew (in feet), I realized that this was not going to be easy, so I began to build a separate stack of games that had a profound effect on me; GunValkyrie was at the top of that stack. The first

thing you see when you boot-up GunValkyrie is Kelly spinning into view as her Gearskin seals off the haunting beauty of her upper extremities. That, and her running on the planet surface to the triumphant theme that accompanies the first level, is all I need on any give day to remind me how much I love video games.



NOTEWORTHY



Jet Set Radio Future

smilebit / sega

Incredible style meets deep and challenging gameplay in this totally unique action/adventure/platform game from the masters at Smilebit.



Blinx: The Time Sweeper

artoon / microsoft

One of the most original games we've seen in a long time, Artoon's Blinx: The Time Sweeper brought some welcome Japanese charm to the 'box.

Sony PlayStation 2

Ratchet & Clank

developer: insomniac / publisher: sony

The first time Ratchet & Clank was officially shown off, way early and way incomplete, questions concerning the game's technical achievements demanded to be asked: How are you moving all this around so smoothly? What did you do to animate the characters so well? Is the final game going to look this good from start to finish? Where are the tricks?

My biggest question: why so many games out there with half the level of detail and sophistication yet half the accomplished polish and shine? The answers to these and many more questions began with a smile and humble thank you; behind closed doors, Insomniac had to be throwing a collective high-five. Now they can toast to the

well-deserved honors of PlayStation 2 game of the year.

The striking exterior went a long way in making R&C such fantastic entertainment, delighting us every step of the way with its wide variety of alien planets, all bustling with life and energy. But look past the immediate frills and you see incredible variety in the gameplay, which borrowed from the best platforming ideas of old while incorporating creative originality, namely in the tons of gadgets and weapons. Some of the items you picked up were so inventive and well designed that you really did feel like you were a part of something fresh and new, something, in the words of Insomniac, revolutionary.



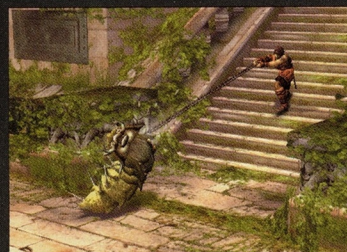
NOTEWORTHY



Sly Cooper

sucker punch / sony

Sucker Punch brought a great sense of style and a keen eye for classic, addictive gameplay to Sly Cooper, making it one of the best games of the year.



Rygar: The Legendary Adventure

tecno

Tecmo pulled out all the stops with this gorgeous action game, full of startling beauty, awesome action, and a luscious musical score.

Nintendo Gamecube

Metroid Prime

developer: retro studios / publisher: nintendo



When a friend at Retro told me three years ago Prime was going to be first-person, I told him to have shock-proof glass installed on the building. Right up to the first time I played Prime I was a planning on casting the first stone, now I'm just humbled by it.

You've heard us bark like a dog at midnight about Prime, so I'll qualify this award with more strangeness. Back when I started really getting into games with the introduction of the NES, Metroid had a profound effect on me. Standing there shooting bugs as they rose from pipes to fill my energy became ingrained

in my psyche, as did jumping and spinning, and the music hasn't left me since; that and the original Zelda's field hymn are mapped onto my brain. So proud was I to beat Mother Brain and floored by the flowing blonde locks as Samus removed her helmet, I took a picture of the screen. Subsequently, the pursuit of that special feeling took me over, forming an addiction so strong it compelled me to somehow make a living chasing it, and now, here I am, sixteen years later, having found it yet again, only this time I don't have to take a picture; they send them to me.



Super Mario Sunshine

nintendo

What more can be said about Super Mario Sunshine? It's an incredible experience, full of fun, joy, and discovery. It's the kind of game that only Nintendo can make.



Phantasy Star Online

sonic team / sega

One of the most addictive games of all time? Perhaps. Sonic Team's foray online shows a surprising understanding of how to make an addictive online experience.

NOTEWORTHY

Sony PSone

Arc the Lad Collection

developer: arc development / publisher: working designs



As much as we all love C-12: Final Resistance, there's no denying that once again Working Designs traversed far beyond the call of duty bringing their last PSone game to fruition. Contained within a single box, Arc Collection boasted four RPGs on 5 CDs, a making-of CD, a 150- page hardcover leatherette art/instruction book, thumb button covers, a memory card holder, and character mini-standees. Had this collection hit in the

heyday of the PlayStation, it would have caused a veritable sensation. As it stands, seeing as how all of the games are nostalgia treasures, it is at the very least the greatest parting gift you can own to celebrate the console that bore 3D gaming and made Sony the video-game powerhouse they have become today. We wait with baited breath for WD's next such offering and pray it's timely enough for them to reap the full benefits.

"Working Designs traversed far beyond the call of duty bringing their last PSone game to fruition."



C-12: Final Resistance

scea / sce cambridge

Cambridge Studios held fast to the PSone and kept chipping away at C-12 well into the PS2's term. The result is one of the very best PS action games ever crafted, if you can survive it.



The Italian Job

pixellogic / take two

Take Two's vid-game send up of the legendary Ocean's Eleven-meets-The Love Bug Brit caper, The Italian Job, was a 14 car thick, 60's drenched, mission based, driving extravaganza.

NOTEWORTHY

2002

GAME OF THE YEAR

MetroidPrime

system: **gamecube** / developer: **retro studios** / publisher: **nintendo**

There is no defined criteria for game of the year. It doesn't come down to how good the camera was, how cool the licensed soundtrack was, how naturally effortless the control felt. Big polygon counts and ceaseless action aren't the swing factor. Bodies don't need to explode and there doesn't have to be a military-grade arsenal of weapons to strap on. Sure, there are countless, quantifiable factors that go into a grand game, but when we sat down to crown Metroid the grandest of them all, there was so little debate, no weighing the good and the bad with inane observations. About the only judging going on was if Metroid was either the best game of the year, or the best game of the year by a resounding margin.

Metroid is a game of moments. You play the game to see what captivating treasure could possibly be unearthed next. It begins on fire and builds to an inferno. When you're not playing it, you wish you were, and life seems a little bit better because of it. When you speak of it, you describe scenes as you would an accomplished film. Incredulity isn't far behind: "Can you believe the rock boss!" "Can you believe those snow creatures, not to mention that snow!" "That underwater level shouldn't exist!" "Seriously, how did this game get made!"

Existing within the newfound possibilities of modern game design, Metroid Prime is a technical and artistic marvel, dumping us in an intriguing universe of incredible complexity. The spirit of Metroid gloriously lives within the ruins, and technique and design ideas were sensibly borrowed from the previous Metroids. But land on the magnificent space station of the game's prologue with no knowledge of the previous Nintendo masterpiece, and the existence of the extraordinary surroundings and Samus' struggle within this alien place need nothing of the pull of nostalgia.

It's a pointless exercise to continue debating Metroid Prime's first-person groundings. Part of what makes the game such a delirious engagement is the incomparable intensity afforded by the tight view, and the game never plays like a typical FPS, relying on tension and complex setups as much as run-and-gun shootouts. Enemies demonstrated impressive movement and pattern, attacking with a ferocious intensity towards the game's end, and they were as much fun to admire as blast with Samus' wave beam. When you do finally make it to the final epic confrontation, there is no doubt that Metroid Prime is a modern classic.

"Existing within the newfound possibilities of modern game design, Metroid Prime is a technical and artistic marvel, dumping us in an intriguing universe of incredible complexity."



Staff Comment

Dave Halverson

Editor in Chief

Day in and day out, 365 days a year, I am focused on one thing—video games. I have chosen to make their consumption my life's work (man that sounds funny) and take evaluating games as seriously as any professional takes his or her work, save for maybe a brain surgeon, or the booking agent for Jerry Springer. Having seen and reported on the progression of video games and their subsequent mainstream metamorphosis over the course of the last decade, I consider this year among the most pivotal, along side the second year of PlayStation when Sony began challenging the then-Big Two, Sega and Nintendo. It wasn't so long ago that Sony changed the face of this industry—time really does fly when you're having fun.

It's always been exciting when the latest hardware apps hit their stride, but the latest machines have ushered in the evolution of 3D, and as a result, sparked newfound fascination with a much broader segment of the population. Over the last decade, gamer and developer have grown together, yielding the current crop of interactive sanctums we call video games; some of the world's most creative minds in the art of storytelling, character and world design, and music have gradually mastered the interactive experience. With the incubation period behind us, the door is wide open. From scouring the valley floor of Tir Na Nog in *GunValkyrie* to frolicking in the surf on the sun-drenched shores of Mario Sunshine, today's games have become more than the sum of their parts. Video games stand on the threshold of becoming Hollywood interactive, and truly changing the face of entertainment.

Before embarking on my top 10 for 2002, I'd like to explain how I review

games, as I often get inquiries but have never taken the liberty to respond. Recently I had someone ask me how I could consider both *Metroid* and *Blinx* five-star worthy, which is a perfect stepping off point. Equating it to films, it's the same as giving *Punch Drunk Love* and *The Two Towers* the same score, one being a quirky indie and one a mega-budget epic. I rate games based on how they perform in their respective categories, so when I'm reviewing *Blinx*, the last thing on my mind is *Metroid*, or any other game outside the genre for that matter. *Blinx* is an Ohshima (co-creator of *Sonic*) platformer. His angle is to give the player ten minutes to extract as much initial joy as possible from one of his unique worlds, and leave them wanting more. Taking that premise to the next level through time manipulation by way of cats as keepers of time, I felt he pretty much raised the bar on the platforming puzzle-solving hybrid. *Blinx* is also a programming wonder, and the feel-good game of the year. A lover of Japanese platformers, to compare it to anything outside that realm would be a disservice to its core audience. When I hear Ohshima's trademark drum flutters and jingly happy tunes, it transports me back to *NIGHTS* and import *Sonic CD* like a waking time warp. The people who know what that means will love *Blinx*, and the people who don't will hopefully be compelled to find out what the hell I'm talking about. I'm an equal opportunity critic.

Innovation and art direction are also key factors. Case in point, *Herdy Gerdy*, another game I deemed five-stars worthy, even though it takes a slight hit on the frame rate when the camera's zoomed all the way out. The universe, gameplay, and

overall breadth of *Gerdy's* world were so captivating that its acceptable frame rate, which doesn't affect gameplay in the least, is a non-issue. A game like *Gerdy* can afford some hiccups since it's really about immersion into the world. I rate *Gerdy* as a work of art more than a technological work. Seven years in the making, it was still just ahead of its time, but we were so lucky to have had it. Equate it to the many perfect reviews *GTA: Vice City* is receiving. Its antiquated models and ready-to-retire engine don't take away from the fact that it's a brilliantly produced game. Whether you're running down hookers or herding Doops to save a realm, both games do what they set out to magnificently—the rest is a matter of personal taste.

I also prefer to replay levels, seeing how it's the essence of gaming as we know it. I like my save points mid-level when they're an hour in length or more, otherwise at level's end is just fine. If I get plugged in the skull trotting that last inch to the goal, good for him, her, or it; I should have seen it coming. Next time, I'll return the favor. *Shinobi* did it right: once I've reached the boss, if it kills me I begin there, but die anywhere else and it's back to the start. If I don't like a level enough to replay it, after I expire, that would be my reason for scoring it low, rather than the fact that I couldn't save on the fly. I believe a reader should be aware of a reviewer's skill level so they don't avoid a title for the wrong reasons. Case in point, *Enclave*. It's brutally hard but brutally beautiful—the kind of game that rewards you for your perseverance, and provides a sense of great accomplishment when you beat it, unlike so many of today's games. A given reviewer's inability to master a game shouldn't impair

the score. If a game is artificially hard because of bad programming, that should. When the credits roll, you're supposed to feel like you've accomplished something that took great skill, perseverance, cunning, etc... That's the essence of gaming, the foundation without which games would be movies with tethered remotes. I think there's room for reviewers of variable skill levels (as long as they know what they're talking about), as there are consumers to match, they just shouldn't be reviewing *Enclave*. If a fruit-ball film critic with more hair on his lip than most people have on their head gives *xxX* an F, I'm buying tickets, but if Roger Ebert gives it the thumbs down, I'm all about the DVD. Ebert digs the anime, he's the man.

While we're on the difficulty subject, how about these games that tell you what to do next, through either the lead character (drama drain) or worse, arrows. I'm not talking training, but woven throughout the game. *Take Dead* to Rights for instance: Gee, I wonder if the doorknob with the green brackets around it is the one? No worries, the bonehead I'm steering around will surely bark out a to-do list regardless. Or *Grandia Extreme*: huge blinking arrows depicting the location of a ladder? Whatever happened to exploration? The worst thing that can happen at this point is for games to become mind-numbing walkthroughs. Seeing the likes of *GunValkyrie*, *Jet Set Radio Future*, *Enclave*, *Star Fox Adventures*, and *Mario Sunshine* get slammed this year for things like not enough save points, bad camera (when it's player controlled), being too hard, or being too much like the last one, made me ill. We want sequels unlike their AAA counterparts? Games should be easy first-time

"Day in and day out, 365 days a year, I am focused on one thing—video games."

walkthroughs where nothing is left to skill or chance? No. Go buy a DVD. If a game has crap animation, character design, or control, it's doomed, but most require much exploration before a word can be written, which brings us to the precarious subject that is a game's length.

How long a game is or isn't shouldn't be an issue. An action game, for example, might derive length from challenge, requiring several do-overs to peel back its deepest layers, like *Contra: Shattered Soldier* or *Rygar: The Legendary Adventure*. In a recent press junket we attended, during a video phone conference with Miyamoto, somebody asked him "how long" the new *Zelda* was, and you could sense his deep frustration with the question. Producers don't design games to be long; they design them to be fun, taking into account a laundry list of individual factors, like how good the player is and how he or she decides to play. The way I explore every inch of a game and soak in every panorama may be completely different from someone else's approach. I may beat a boss the first or second time while someone else may take hours to slay the beast. The trick is to strike a balance. In the months ahead, I believe beginning with *Tork*, one of my most anticipated games of 2003, you'll begin to see true dynamic difficulty—the ultimate compensation for players of all skill levels. Ultimately, I believe how long a game really is, is pretty much up to you. I'll never stop playing *Sin and Punishment*, *Wario World* on the *Virtual Boy*, and a host of other favorites, making them all longer than *Morrowind*.

Moving onto a facet of 3D gaming that really chaffs my hide, let's briefly explore cameras and use *Mario Sunshine* as an

example for the barrage. Critics got upset when *Sunshine*'s camera didn't slice through objects like polygonal butter so they could see every inch in front of them, all of the time. Realize, if cameras were to do so, games as we know them would not be as broad or populated given the technology they are created on. Yes, there are bad cameras. *Kingdom Hearts* had a "bad" camera. A bad camera is one that doesn't allow flexibility or that limits your line of site in crucial life-or-death situations when there's no other way to deal with an adversary or obstacle. The camera in *Mario Sunshine* is player-controlled and so effortless I forgot it had one. When you're firing blindly in *Resident Evil* you know where the zombie is even though you can't see it. The price for those amazing environments is the inability to spin them, so, not a bad camera, just *Resident Evil*.

What destroys a game (for me) more than any of the above is bad character design, animation, music, flow, collision and long and/or frequent load times. Take *Haven*: it's a five-star game if it had a good lead character. Or *Morrowind*: the game is beloved by many but its characters are so ugly and misshapen I can't even look at it. *Kain* is an almost too-good design, but one upright running scheme does not a great vampire make; he jogs like he's going out for a pass. Characters need to lean when they turn or at least look natural. And when my character is on a grade, I need the feet to match. There's nothing worse than standing on an incline balancing on toe or heel, and please, change the animation routine when I'm going upstairs whenever possible. *Primal* rewrites this chapter in character design; I pray it's the shape of things to come. The character movement

in *Primal*, *GunValkyrie*, *Maximo*, and *Ratchet & Clank*, to name a few, should stand as examples for all to pin their hopes on; *BloodRayne* was down with her bad self too, although she's guilty as charged of looking a fool on many an incline.

Speaking of *BloodRayne*, I do prefer my games in third person whenever possible. I need to identify with my lead to fully commit to the material. It's a rare FPS (*Metroid*, *Halo*) that can induce the same effect. *Tomb Raider* started it, and games like *GunValkyrie*, *Jet Set Radio Future*, *Rygar*, *Shinobi*, *Maximo* and *Devil May Cry* continue to feed my lust for virtual super stars.

And finally, what really tips the scales is, of course, music. Setting the proper mood for a given game, audio is among the most important elements. If you don't pause and let out a heaving sigh the first time you enter Naglfars' pit in *GunValkyrie*, check for a pulse, and if *Rygar* doesn't bring you to your knees, the volume is too low. Music and/or ambient sound are the backbone of every game. Yuzo Koshiro (Y's, *Streets of Rage*, *Revenge of Shinobi*, *Act Raiser*) and Zuntata (Darius and countless other Taito offerings) began my love affair with game music and although Japan's maestros continue to produce the soundtracks of my life, *Halo* and *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* did well this past year on the American front, although Japan is still BGM king. On that note, thrash, punk, and top-40 music in my video game is not a good thing. *Rob Zombie* can play me in, but once the level starts, I need an original score, no exceptions, save for maybe *POD*, *Korn*, *Lincoln Park*, *Rod Zombie*, *Marilyn Manson* and the like in the odd skateboarding or other select X game. Accomplished musicians

should sculpt game soundtracks, not rehash title tracks on them.

I hope all this shines a light on what I bring to the table when I review a game. I'm not afraid to give 4-5 star reviews where I deem them fit in any given genre. I listen to no one and care not what popular opinion, marketing, or anyone else says. I don't even attend junkets (don't believe in them), so I'm not swayed in any way. I get the disc, sit down alone and begin the process. I've done it the same way for 12 years and still receive humbling feedback. My hope moving forward is that my prose overall can inspire new users on gaming present, and provide them a sense of nostalgia so that they might take a look back and come to appreciate the evolution of this art form as much as I do.



Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus

ps2 / sucker punch / sony

10

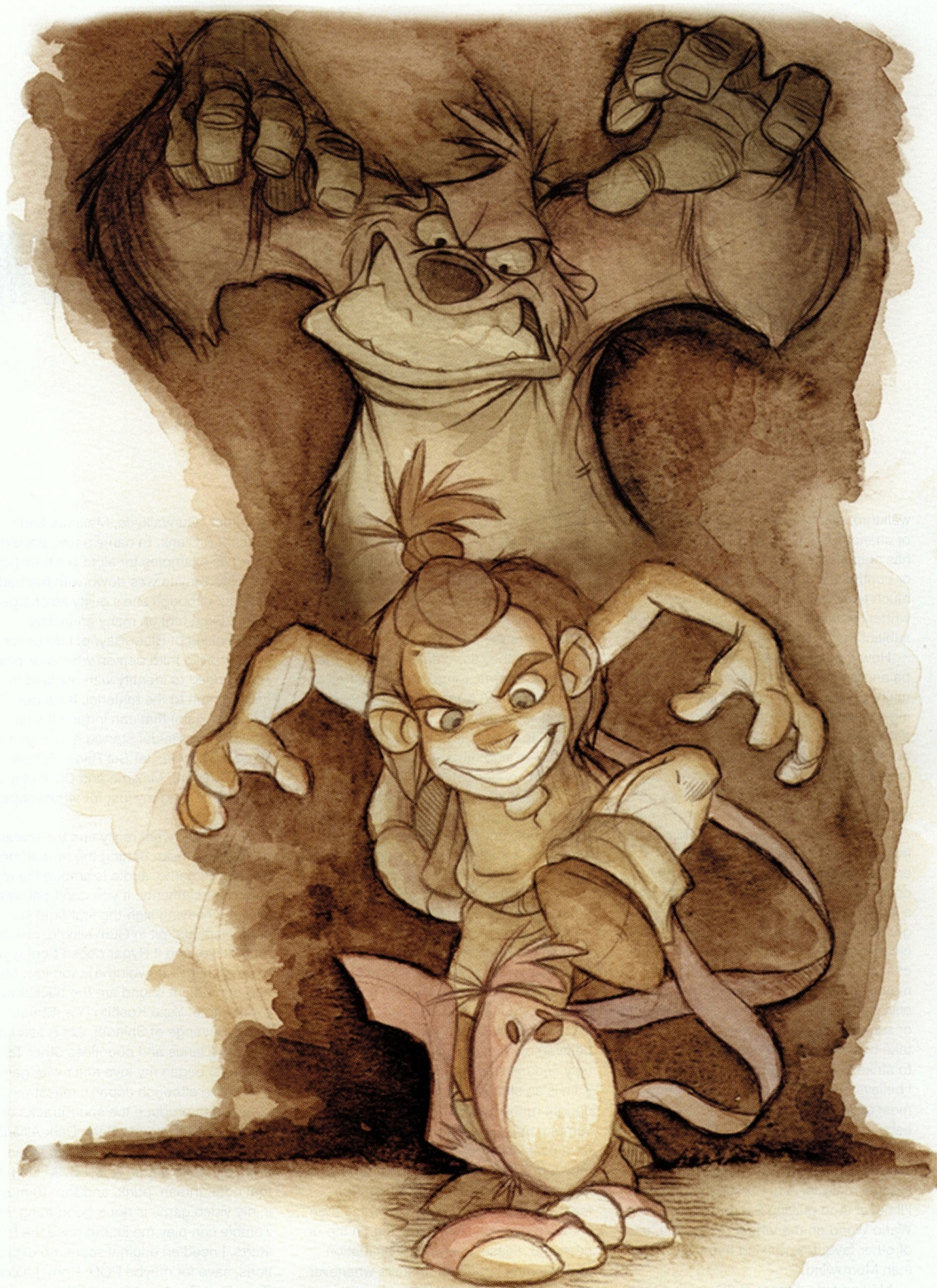
More stealth-laden platforming and less mini-games would have put Sly somewhere in my top three, but even with its heaping helpings of racing and shooting on the side, Sly still managed to sneak into my top ten. In terms of style and overall presentation, Sly ranks among the best character-based action-adventure series ever produced. If ever a new franchise was primed for superstardom, Thievius Raccoonus is it. The material, with its cel-shaded noir look and kooky cast, lends itself to all forms of media and merchandising. How this game didn't start a veritable sensation puzzles me. Sly also introduced the gaming world to Sucker Punch, one of America's most talented and, until now, underrated developers. The buttery control in Sly instantly adheres to you its charms—legendary responsiveness in a hyper-animated character we haven't felt since EarthWorm Jim. The levels are meticulously tuned, beautifully textured and posses a flow rarely seen in action games, interlaced with stylized diorama segues that transcend cool—truly a work of art and skill. Here's to a sequel less for the masses and more the platform savvy.

Herdy Gerdy

ps2 / core / eidos

09

If you missed Herdy Gerdy, and chances are you did, you missed more than a video game; you missed a slice of Core Design gone by, and probably the last game they'll ever produce that exhibits their masterful cartoon flare. Seven years in the making, this living 'toon that existed as concept since before the Sega Saturn crashed and burned, gave us a world to explore that personifies charming, in a fantasy adventure that looks and plays like no other. At times, the breadth of the worlds astounded me, built of tiny sticks and rope bridges—the craftsmanship is extraordinary. Most profoundly, though, Core breathed life into the polygonal realm like never before, achieving true expression through painting high poly models with animated skins. The overall achievement here on the whole—tuning, level design, music, and art—are what legendary games used to be made of. Gerdy fell prey to so much bonehead criticism over a framerate issue, it made me ill. Few if any critics played long enough to understand it anyway, and once again, a spectacle fell by the wayside. In a perfect world, Gerdy would have found his way to Xbox, but there's no chance. If you're an adventurous soul, find this game.



Star Fox Adventures

gc / rare / nintendo

08

Imagine a year where a Rare adventure game starring Fox McCloud ends up number eight and that's 2002 in a nutshell.

Knowing full well the evolution of this title, with its transformation from a non-branded N64 game to a Fox-branded GameCube game, I expected polished N64 architecture, so, when I experienced the ensuing bliss of these beautiful models covered in fur and scales, it further fueled my deep love for the ethereal qualities of the story—taking gods into Fox McCloud's soul and releasing them back into their hallowed sanctuaries. Doing so to free one of the year's most compelling characters, Krystal, a beauty deserving of her own franchise, proved to be fulfilling in more ways than I ever imagined. What kept SFA out of my top five was the repetitive nature of the enemy and a lack of diversity in the short but sweet flying segues. In every other respect, *Star Fox Adventures* is superb. The news of Rare's exodus to Microsoft came in as I was playing *Star Fox Adventures*, thinking to myself what a beautiful union they and Nintendo had. I haven't been rocked by news to such a degree since Sega announced their exit from the hardware race. *Star Fox Adventures* was Rare's last Nintendo game.



Ratchet & Clank

ps2 / insomniac / sony

07

Last year Naughty Dog set a new standard with the introduction of Jak and Daxter, the first game to utilize a seamless

world design—a trend I was optimistic would catch fire, and it has, twice this year alone (with this and Midway's *Haven*). What I found especially surprising and infinitely gratifying playing *Ratchet & Clank* was how different the two games are. While they may seem similar on the surface, Insomniac paint their own unique style onto this exciting new canvas, producing a game that produced on me a grin as wide as *Ratchet's*—and that's wide. While *Ratchet & Clank* isn't as platformy (that is so not a word) as I'd like, it is busting at the seams with colorful characters, witty repartee, intelligent tongue in cheek humor (which is hard to do) and an array of weapons that I'm pretty sure will never be topped. The engine is a thing of pure beauty, the graphics a cartoon cornucopia and the gameplay wickedly vibrant, addicting, and full of wonder. The fact that it sits at number seven on my list is a testament to this amazing year.



Jet Set Radio Future

xb / smilebit / sega

06

"Yes I'm cooking for my son and his wife, it's his 30th birthday," and the year's coolest soundtrack booms

on, enveloping the most underrated sequel to the most underrated game of all time. On any given day this year, JSRF was my game of the year. This is my *Vice City*, a universe for me to traverse, dripping with style and uber character design from the gods at Smilebit. Me and Boogie have seen the sites, baby, and run more punks and corporate goons out of Tokyo than the Yakuza, grinding rails, traversing canyon-wide urban gaps, defying gravity, and looking really marvelous doing it. JSRF is mission-based free-form gaming at its very best and the definition of flow. I will never stop playing this game, unless they make another one, which I highly doubt, seeing as how it shot over most of the media's head. I'm still trying to figure out if that's a bad thing.



Maximo

ps2 / capcom digital studios / capcom

05

Strider, Ghouls 'n' Ghosts, Act Raiser, Metroid, Golden Axe, Bionic Commando, Shinobi, Ninja Gaiden, Magician Lord, and Castlevania: these are the action franchises that most gamers pray will go on forever. To date few of our wishes have been granted, with even fewer living up to their namesake. Of the lot, Maximo and Metroid stand as shining examples of how to transform 2D magic into 3D magic. A lot of what makes Maximo so special lies in the details: dark patches of earth that sprout clingy skeleton bones; daisies that push up after death; burying your sword in bark and prying it loose when you strike a tree; and those infamous boxer shorts. But details aside, Maximo is the picture of precision action and platforming, with perfect double-jump control, levels that evolve as you assail them, unforgettable bosses, and classic music revisited, all in a hub-based, drop-dead gorgeous package. Featuring character designs by the renowned Famitsu artist Susumu Matsushita, Maximo was this year's top platformer by a wide margin.

Super Mario Sunshine

gc / nintendo / nintendo

04

Without going off on a seething rant about the most irresponsible journalism in the history of the industry (one magazine went as far as saying it was total crap), let me just say that when you start taking pot shots at Mario and Miyamoto, it's time to move on. You can say it's not for you, but to say it's technologically inferior or not well-produced is pure Yoshi poo. Anyone who's been to the top of the spire in Mare Bay and jumped off into the water below (where the level continues) knows, Mario this year, like every other it has graced us with its presence, was magic. The Fludd (water pak) system was pure genius, the control exactly what we've come to expect and the mood, pure Mario—on vacation. Graphically I was swept away by the water, heat waves, and painted look to the textures that only Nintendo can seem to do, and the way the story blossomed in and around Delfino Isle is a testament to the Miyamoto touch. The first time I heard someone say Sunshine was like a better version of Super Mario 64 and, therefore, somehow not all-that, I wanted to hurt them. To all those who rose against it, may a thousand Pikmin shit in your garden.

GunValkyrie

xb / smilebit / sega

03

Why do I want to crawl inside of this game and hold Kelly? Why do I love it more every time I play? Moreover, how does the music affect me so? What is this vexing amalgam of sight and sound? The year's best gamer's game was GunValkyrie. This is what happens when a company like Smilebit says to hell with the rest of the world and makes a game for the elite men (and maybe a few women) who bravely gave their all to conquer such behemoths as the Contras, Castlevanias, BattleToads, and Treasure games of the world. It is an action boost and hover ballet, reserved for masters of the dual-stick pad—a game that once you find its rhythm rewards you like no other. The models are seamless works of art, the architecture is the stuff of sci-fi dreams, and the music is such that it fuses with the gameplay, creating a harmony with the player that is impossible to describe—truly poetry in motion. I will concede that it's reserved for advanced players or those seeking to become so; in fact, we'd be better off if those were the only people who ever touched it.



Rygar: The Legendary Adventure

ps2 / tecmo / tecmo

02

Arriving at the Poseidonia Shrine a couple hours into Rygar, I dropped my controller and just sat there, staring and listening in awe. I called friends, emailed my contact at Tecmo, giggled in anticipation, and then pressed on. The ankle-deep water in the shrine reacts differently to running, walking, or sliding, splashing in cadence with Rygar's animation as the water cascades down the coliseum steps leading to the Heaven Room, an inner sanctum that defines hallowed. As you move around the shrine, the sound of rushing water fades and builds depending on your relative location to the source, while the music permeates your senses to near euphoric levels—definitely one of those moments. In its entirety, Rygar is a series of those moments interrupted by crunching medieval action the likes of which that you have never seen or, more importantly, felt. So pixel-perfect is this game's collision that the meeting of Diskarmor and stone resonates through the dual shock like no other single in-game action ever has. It's as fulfilling an action experience you can possibly have by today's standards, I'm almost sure of it. What Strider was to 16-bit Rygar is to 128—action honed to perfection. Wielding the Diskarmor was the year's most satisfying play mechanic, and bearing witness to the visual splendor of this game was one of the highlights of my years playing games. Why it isn't my game of the year even I may never understand. I'd forgotten how apt Tecmo was at action gaming, since Ninja Gaiden faded from memory: it's been that long since they've made a similar game for console. Reminded, I'm left to deal with the sad fact that few games of its kind will aspire to this level of greatness any time soon.



Metroid Prime

gc / retro studios / nintendo

01

Choosing a favorite this year was a struggle I'll probably never come to terms with, but *Metroid Prime* in all of its old- and new-school glory simply cannot be denied the crown when you consider the magnitude of this title. For a US/Japan co-developed game based on a concept from the late great Gumpei Yokoi, the man who changed my world with *Metroid*, *Prime* is truly a marvel that redefines the term "epic." Never have I witnessed this level of attention to detail spread so consistently throughout a game. So many of *Prime*'s rooms, threaded throughout a vast network of cavernous sprawls, hold hidden surprises and branching that it's almost unfathomable how a first-time developer achieved the full promise of its interior. Imagining the design documents and effort that must have gone into its creation is staggering, let alone achieving the look, which is simply unmatched in the annals of first-person gaming. The walls in *Prime* alone possess a level of depth scarcely, if ever, seen, among free-roaming environments. Etchings, cracks, and erosion—all have real definition and are covered with textures that defy the system's memory given the unfaltering framerate. And *Prime* never even hints at hiccupping.

Aside from the game's technical merits, which I could site all day, the most important aspect of *Prime* is, of course, its feel. You sense its roots from the outset but by the time you discover the Gravity Armor, it's taken up residence in your soul, just as the NES and SNES versions did. It's "that feeling" again, the one you figure after so many games you'll never get back; *Metroid Prime* is all about that feeling. We never in our wildest dreams thought an FPS version of *Metroid* from an American developer could achieve this level of eminence, but here it is, an example for all Nintendo naysayers to see—they found a way.



ANDROID JONES 2001
RETRO STUDIOS™

Staff Comment

Brady Fiechter Executive Editor

My good friend is a very grown-up father with a real life full of responsibilities and adult concerns. Last night he called to chat about his patients and the country's dissolving health-care system, about the looming threat overseas and our ambiguous yearning to be the world's daddy. He was also a little concerned that his wife was compromising her work and their relationship by replacing sleep with far too many seasons of NBA Live 2003. It took a while, but we finally got to the real reason he called: "I can't stop playing Metroid. I just can't stop."

Me neither. Apparently, neither can you, and of course I'm not just talking the incomparable Metroid Prime.

Welcome to the world of videogames, where millions—not just young and puerile, but smart, mature, thoughtful, adult, an every-day person who just wants to be highly entertained—have come to explore the increasingly fertile landscape. If it's not Metroid, it's Vice City, if it's not Vice City, it's Madden, if it's not Madden, it's Resident Evil, if it's not Resident Evil, it's some game that couldn't have, wouldn't have existed even two years ago.

Entertainment Weekly tells us on its cover that video games are "changing pop culture forever." Newsweek proclaims that the Sims is a revolution. The January Wired practically dooms all other forms of entertainment, proclaiming that games have become a "cultural force." Actors won't shut up about how cool gaming is. Musicians and athletes wouldn't be able to make a roadtrip without them. Those in the know are as cool as you are, and you're as cool as them. You and I run to the store with a childlike glee when Mario and Zelda and Phantasy Star and Ratchet & Clank and Halo 2 and Tony Hawk finally hit. How can anyone resist all the marketing and

sparkle, all the hipness and pervasiveness and entertainment value.

Games are becoming movies, movies are becoming games—mass entertainment in general is consistently receiving the video-game stamp in some form or another. Video gaming has now "arrived." Has gone "mainstream."

Games are finally being preached from a much larger pulpit, but the message is convoluted, and the potential impact has yet to be truly felt. What I find most unfortunate is the still-cemented myth that young boys caught in an adolescent black hole make up the gaming community—even despite the fresh stats and new coverage that argue the complete opposite. And persisting outside the circles who really do get it is the familiar overriding tone: games are soulless light shows that require some good hand and eye coordination and a dulled mind. All this broad-audience feeding may expose the popularity of what was once labeled as an esoteric hobby, but I'm ready to see the advancement of the art form, revealing the heart of what defines a "gamer" and, so much more importantly, what defines the gaming "experience."

All this grand success and newfound popularity and inevitable future growth is all good stuff, but it means nothing to me when it comes to the experience contained in the game around me. I played more games this year than ever before, and most of them robbed me of my time. A handful were wellsprings of late night entertainment; a few captured my deepest imagination. Perhaps with more exposure and more respect, the years to come will reveal an even richer mine of diamonds in the rough. I see a long road to travel before games consistently move us like a powerful film, but shortcuts can be quickly discovered once developers and the eyes watching

them break outside the tightly controlled box and see the enriching possibilities this relatively young industry is capable of.

In perhaps no other year have I been so excited for the future yet so critical of the underachieving majority. It can only get better, will get better, and everyone's still watching and learning. Games are better than they have ever been, but a Vice City is not the solution for artistic accomplishment; famous actors and violence and loose gameplay are not the answer. Like a great film, I want a game to move me, and know that it can.

My thoughts this year are not on the usual importance: how inventive is that new play mechanic, are the models high poly enough, can you drop in more trees and monsters? I'm hoping for a rearranged focus: can you tell a better story, is the art department showing creative strength, is the gameplay structure dynamic and engaging with its presentation as much as its technique, am I looking at something that dazzles my sense of wonder? And seriously, can we finally do something about scoring proper music and find a way to recognize the importance of sound in the experience?

I'm not responding to gameplay much differently than I did five years ago—there just isn't that much introduced that is excitingly new, or even necessary—but I certainly am experiencing them on an altered level, moved by fantastic imagery and traditional ideas given altered form. In a year of so much positive change and hints of a sensational future, I've never been so excited for what's to come. For now, here's the impossibly incomplete list of what I saw as the year's best, each game offering something exceptional that seemed to leap beyond the defined boundaries of an ordinary game.

GunValkyrie

xb / smilebit / sega

10

Assigning the boost button to an analog-click was a questionable choice, and a lot of people couldn't contend with the difficulty and got bogged down by the long, open spaces of play, but allow GunValkyrie to work its strengths and it jumps under your skin. Only a Japanese developer could envision this strange world of science fiction and lush fantasy, but going beyond the visual presence and level complexity, the shooting and platforming components spoke from the action powerhouses of old.

Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus

ps2 / sucker punch / sony

09

It may be tamer in its ambitions and scope than a lot of the higher-profile games this year, but Sly Cooper takes an oldschool approach to jumping, ducking, slashing and avoiding to sensational heights. The idea of a thief who must sneak through his world while tackling obstacles head-on is fresh and fun, even if the game goes too light on the most creative aspects. The strict gameplay path is an appealing choice, lending the game a focused, intensive urgency that makes the platforming even more addicting. Call this game too basic if you will, but there is no room to criticize one of the most color saturated, wonderfully appealing settings built for a game this year. Creators Sucker Punch show tons of talent; I can't wait to see what they come up with next.

"In perhaps no other year have I been so excited for the future yet so critical of the underachieving majority."

FIFA 2003

xb, ps2, gc / ea

08

Sports games used to be fast-paced fun, but the past few years have left me giving up on the idea of someone getting past the technology and making a proper simulation—a game that doesn't just have good models and stupid amounts of options but captures the spirit of the live match. Yes, FIFA 2003 looks amazing, attending to so many subtleties and nuanced details that even a snobby football (soccer to me) fan will be red in the face trying to point out what's missing. Nothing's missing, and the way the play unfolds, the way the players move and converge and strike, is all that really matters in the end. This was the best year for sports games—hockey, basketball and football made big strides as well—and the first time gameplay seems to be receiving proper focus again. With the camera pulled out to admire the action on the field, a friend was overheard saying it best, "I'd rather play this than watch the real thing."

Ratchet & Clank

ps2 / insomniac / sony

04

With the ambitious, creatively broad Ratchet & Clank, Insomniac has convinced me that their endearing style of game design is to be cherished. American designers don't normally invent adventures like this, spilling over with tremendous care and craft, visually inventive and rooted in an inescapable cheer. For all the complexity and obvious grasp of stalwart gameplay ideas, Ratchet & Clank feels familiar enough, but so colorfully stylized and imaginatively childlike are its universe, so cleverly staged and endlessly addictive is the adventure, the game leaps beyond everything around it. Technical strengths alone thrill, from the animation to the level structure to the immensity of it all; there is no denying the polish and scope of a game that has been blessed with robust first-party resources, but what makes Ratchet & Clank a heartfelt accomplishment are the countless subtle touches that show Insomniac's obvious joy for what they do. So much to do, so much to see, so much to uncover, so much heart, so much fun.

Resident Evil 0

gc / capcom

07

OK, I'll finally concede: Resident Evil could use a shakeup, and I don't mean adding a character and putting a poor bandage on a wound by littering items on the floor. The control needs to change, the puzzles are becoming too arbitrary and disjointed, and the storytelling can no longer be forgiven for its vacuous schlock. Time to get creative and search for something more. Meantime, I'll close my eyes to the shaky stretches and continue to be thrilled by the rest of the ride. So spectacular is Resident Evil: 0 as an experience, so tremendously involving is its imagery of death and decay and gothic decadence that I simply can't resist its pull. And those amazing CG sequences! And those zombies and mutated zombies and creatures who I guess are zombies but are more genetically mutilated freaks of nature! The weakest in the series, yes, but still grandly atmospheric, dynamically presented—no other developer has this kind of film sensibility—and magnificently stylized.

Super Mario Sunshine

gc / nintendo

03

Here was a game that stood equally beside Metroid Prime in the masterful execution of its ideas, incomparably driven by a purity of gameplay—the way every little thing I did rewarded me with that satisfying, smile-inducing sensation only a traditional-leaning platformer is capable of. Commanding the iconic Mario and his delightful watergun was more fun in the central hub alone than most games manage to pack in an entire game. Admittedly, I'm much more interested in a game of this type expanding into a more story-driven, dynamically presented world structure like a Ratchet & Clank, yet no matter how much more appealing that design approach is, Mario Sunshine is so well done that I can only point to the masterpiece Mario 64 as fair competition. Add to the gameplay brilliance a lively, gorgeously crafted setting of bizarrely cheerful inhabitants and childlike playfulness and Mario Sunshine becomes the purest gaming experience I had all year.

Resident Evil

gc / capcom

06

Resident Evil lifts the foundation squarely from the very-long-ago PlayStation original, but this magnificent reimagining was so strengthened by a new jolt of visual electricity that I had no problem going back for another haunt. So gorgeous is this game to look at that I almost view it as an expanding interactive art gallery. Nothing crackles with this level of cinematic presence, nothing glows with this level of detail, and for all who disregard the pre-rendered setting, you'll still not convince me that this type of visual artistry can exist with such impact in real time. Yes, the control needs to change, the gameplay goes nowhere inventively new, but no matter: nothing rattles my gothic bones like the Resident Evil series.

Medal of Honor: Frontline

xb, ps2, gc / ea

02

No game this year bristled with the kind of raw intensity that charged Medal of Honor: Frontline. Europe scarred by the second World War became the powerful, sometimes unsettling surroundings for the chaos and destruction. In the opening, remarkably brutal staging of the battle at Normandy, the horror of such a frightening moment was tremendously palpable. Later, infinitely more subdued stages extended their hold from a different place, relying more on mood and apprehension: the sniper areas were a bold standout in their ability to supply a steady, shaky tension. The technical mastery deserved huge praise, but what ultimately carried Medal of Honor beyond even the best in the genre was the emotional energy that flowed through the experience. I've never been so involved in a game on such a visceral level. Note to game makers: this is how you score a real soundtrack, this is how the familiar can be presented with such skill and artistry that presentation becomes gameplay. Breathtaking.

Rygar: The Legendary Adventure

ps2 / tecmo

05

Rygar was crafted with the operatic touch of a classicist, becoming an experience that drew from a basic structure while infusing the beauty and atmosphere of a mythological world. The elegant, delirious use of color, light and shadow painted a dreamscape of surreal magnetism, sucking me into its fantastical imagery as much as its action-heavy gameplay. I've never played a game that captures this same transfixing, richly enchanting tone—the waterfalls that sparkle with the brilliance of a diamond, the grand statues that tower inside and out, the god-like keepers that guard the ruins. Add to all this a dense, gorgeously composed sound track and Rygar immerses as a perfect sequel, and the surprise achievement of the year.

Metroid Prime

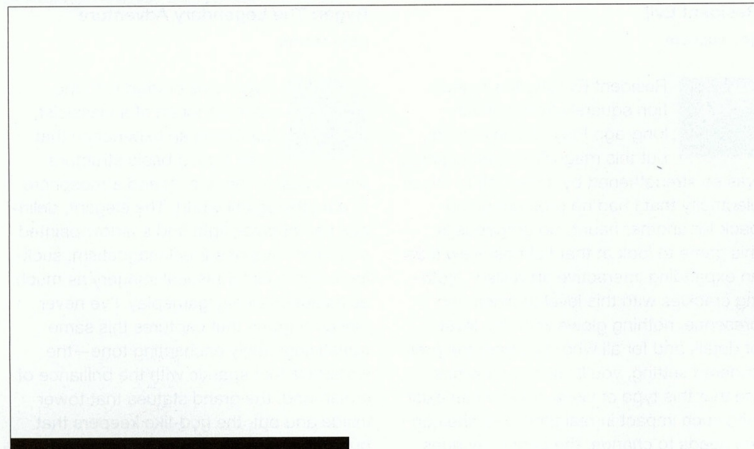
gc / retro studios / nintendo

01

When I first entered the snow-covered peaks and valleys of Phendara Valley, the soundtrack boldly but quietly completing the mood, Metroid Prime signaled itself as a timeless classic. When I picked up the gravity suit and headed underwater—what a definition of a "special moment"—I was convinced of my game of the year. Everything about this game is inspired spectacle: the mystery of the treacherous world, the disarming intensity of its visual wonder, the technical sophistication that bears no rival, the mastery of subtle effects and proper artistry. Looking beyond the many design strokes that forged a forceful, authentic extension of the powerful Metroid universe, Metroid Prime exists as its own incredible achievement, blending action, suspense, atmosphere, exploration and soaring discovery in a way that left my imagination in complete surrender. Most games feel manufactured, existing simply to be played. Metroid existed for my senses to live in.

Staff Comment

Michael Hobbs Art Director



In this age, change comes so fast, you almost can't see it. Of course, I'm not talking about real change, as the heart of man seems set in stone, but surface change. Specifically, the march of technology. This is something I can't get enough of, but it took this year for me to realize how incredibly far we've come in such an incredibly short span of time. I was playing Metroid Prime and it struck me like a ton of bricks: games today look absolutely amazing.

Not that there weren't amazing looking 3D games in the past, but this year, things seemed to crest and tip over the top consistently, moving games farther away from dalliance and into the realm of true experience. As I have said in the past, the better a game looks, the more easily it fools the brain. And a fooled brain is an open one, with senses heightened. As such, today's best-looking games take a more direct path to the mind, engaging us in a way not possible in the past. We are very visual creatures after all.

As a classicist however, I cannot deny that the true worth of a game lies in its gameplay, and this year had some of the best in ages. But I don't expect revolutions in play, just a steady evolution and polish, and that's exactly what I got. My thoughts return to Metroid Prime in this regard, for this was a fantastic example of evolution and perfected execution. There's nothing new about the basic action of the game: you're really just walking, jumping, and shooting, the mantra of most games. It's in the way that these actions are presented, both visually and conceptually, that shows real refinement

and sophistication. It really is a work of art, with level design that defies description and a game flow that only masters could have crafted.

I feel the same way about Super Mario Sunshine, a game which I thought was a little bit under-rated. I saw it as completely brilliant. The way you could manipulate Mario around the environments bordered on the telepathic, so responsive was his control. And the supremely clever layout of each level invited so much experimentation and free-form fun with the water mechanic that I was completely enamored with the entire experience. People complained of the camera, but this was rubbish to me. In a game with such large three dimensional levels and such a quick and nimble character, how else can the camera be but totally manual? An automatic camera simply would not work. Don't believe me? Picture this game in your head with an automatic view change, or worse yet, with the camera stuck to Mario's back, and I think you'll find this to be a dreadful solution.

But enough of that. My thoughts now turn to next year, and I hope that it's a lot like this one. We'll see online console gaming maturing to be sure, and I sense a new level of visual splendor around the corner that should be just as eye-opening as what we saw this year. What I am hoping to see (and have already gotten a glimpse of in The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker) is visual experimentation in the 3D realm. Artists can now focus on what to show the player, not how to show it.

Rez

ps2 / united game artists / sega

10

Rez is certainly one of the coolest games I played this year, so I thought it deserved the last spot on my list. Tetsuya Mizuguchi's singular imagination dreamt up this surreal 3D shooter, where targeting and destroying enemies would create music in time to a backing score. The game imparted an incredible sense of rhythm as you would shoot targets to the electronic beat. Part Tron, part acid trip, all fun!

Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus

ps2 / sucker punch / sony

09

Here was a game of great style and of an addictive, classic sort of fun. Unlike the sprawling Ratchet & Clank, Sly Cooper was a highly compartmentalized experience, with short linear levels and loads of mini-games. This suits my personal taste a bit more, as I like dense, short, action-filled levels with a quick rate of progress. In this case, it helps that the action is spot-on in terms of design, with great bits of platforming, shooting and attacking to flesh out the experience. And I loved the overall look of the game, from the wonderfully judged color palette to the kitschy style of the ambitious cut scenes.

Resident Evil

gc / capcom

08

I've always liked Resident Evil, but I never loved it. It was the sort of game I had to be in the mood to play. It's slow, difficult and tense going, and a mistake could send you back half an hour to your last save. And generally, I liked my characters to have a little more freedom of movement. But put a stunning veneer over the top of this and I'm hooked. Resident Evil on Gamecube is a visually revolutionary game in my book. More than anything that has come before, RE imparted a sensation of reality to the visuals that's unprecedented. Though the backgrounds were of course static in perspective, they were alive with interactive lighting and subtle animations, and the character models were simply stunning.

Contra: Shattered Soldier

ps2 / konami

07

This is the kind of game I always wanted at the start of the 3D generation; a classic 2D style of game executed with polygons. It took a very long time, but I have to admit that Contra: Shattered Soldier was worth the wait. In fact, the delay might have actually enhanced the experience, as I had probably forgotten how good a side scrolling game could be. And this one is executed perfectly. A game like this is all about precision, both in the design and in the way it must be played. You'll do levels over and over until you get it right. To beat the game is to master the game, something that many modern games have abandoned. But with this discipline comes a feeling of accomplishment that is completely old school.

"I was playing Metroid Prime and it struck me like a ton of bricks; games today look absolutely amazing."

Ikaruga (import)
dc / treasure / esp

06 Am I cheating by having an import game on my list, and a Dreamcast one at that? Perhaps, but I can justify it on the grounds that there is Gamecube version coming to the US. Built upon the backbone of one of the oldest gaming genres, the vertically scrolling shooter, Treasure has somehow managed to create something that is not only original in its play, but positively scintillating in its execution. Appearing on the surface to be an impossibly difficult game, the genius of its design is that it's possible to play it perfectly. The enemy patterns are genius and the graphics are incredible on Dreamcast.

GunValkyrie
xb / smilebit / sega

04 In any other year, GunValkyrie probably would have been my game of the year, and it's a testament to the strength of the three games sitting before it that it didn't make it. But this is really my type of game, being all about skill and reflexes. But GunValkyrie goes one better by wrapping this enthusiast style of play in one of the most interesting and beautifully realized sci-fi environments I've seen in a game. The look is pure genius, as is the gorgeous and perfectly suited soundtrack. This is a rare game the likes of which we will probably never see again. Don't miss out on this experience.

Rygar: The Legendary Adventure
ps2 / tecmo

05 Quite literally one of the best looking action games ever made, Rygar: The Legendary Adventure surprises in more ways than one. First there is the general look of the game, which is quite unlike anything I've seen. Pastel hues dominate, and they're used to draw a mythological world of incredible scope and beauty. Secondly, we have the fantastic gameplay, full of satisfying brute-force action and stunning boss encounters. Finally, we have the sumptuous orchestrated soundtrack, which gives the game its final layer of brilliance, making it an action experience for the ages.

Phantasy Star Online Ep 1 & 2
gc / sonic team / sega

03 This has to rank as my guiltiest pleasure of the year. In terms of play time, nothing even comes close. Why the guilt? Because I am aware that I am doing the same thing over and over again, playing the same levels, fighting the same monsters, all for well over 100 hours. Why can't I stop? To be honest, I'm not completely sure. I've become obsessed with this game, with finding all the rare items, with competing at the highest difficulty rating—Ultimate. I play this game when I know I should be playing something else. It's frighteningly addictive this thing, but I take solace in all the other hopeless souls out there playing along with me and in the superb audio/video experience that is Phantasy Star Online. Play at your own risk.



Metroid Prime
gc / retro studios / nintendo

02 Without question this game was the surprise of the year for me. For the longest time, I expected to hate Metroid Prime. What a fool I was. I really clung onto the prejudice that a mostly American development team could not take a classic Japanese effort and do it justice. To say I was wrong would be an understatement of the highest order. This is quite literally one of the best looking games I've ever played, with level design to match. Where Mario is a triumph of play mechanics, Metroid Prime is triumph of atmosphere and presentation. Though it may sound trite, this game truly casts a spell over the player, immersing him or her into a serene and occasionally violent sci-fi universe of mystery and soaring beauty.

Super Mario Sunshine
gc / nintendo / nintendo

01 I had been waiting years for this game, and I was not the least bit disappointed. I live for play mechanics, and Super Mario Sunshine was simply over flowing with them, literally. The genius of the water pack is not to be dismissed, as it added enough newness to the now-classic Super Mario 64 formula to make the whole game feel new. And for the first time, I felt that I was interacting with real water in a video game. As Mario would jump in and out of the water and take the occasional swim, something approaching fluid dynamics was at work, imparting a sense of weight and substance to the water that was truly delightful. Add to this absolutely perfect control, level layout, and visual style, and you've got the makings of my favorite game of the year.



The purest of gaming magic

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

WIND WAKER

words brady fiechter

Walker Percy once wrote: "Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship, as they say in books. I too once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in *The Third Man*."

We lose ourselves to the movies, create memories that seem real. Not every movie can inspire emotion that truly moves us, but the great ones leap inside our imaginations and enrich our lives.

Why should a video game be any different? A movie like, say, *Lord of the Rings: Two Towers* sweeps us

away with its savage beauty, seizing us with mythical pageantry and the universal struggle of Good and Evil. A game of this same emotional scope is not only possible, but there is the potential for an even greater inclusion into the fantasy: in a movie, we observe; in a game, we become.

Most games, while entertaining, aspire to little more than engaging our competitive nature and desire to meet a challenge; the visual exterior is often crude but effective enough to suspend our disbelief and excite our sense of fantasy, which translates into a successful effort. There remains the valid argument that a game must be played, not watched, and by adding too much story, the gameplay experience is snapped. The problem isn't with too much story, it's too much story that holds little interest. If this closed approach to gamemaking continues to be followed and there is no demand for a

higher form of emotional communication, then games will mostly be games.

It's going to be a while before the dialogue in a video game challenges and manipulates. For now, the power lies in the nontraditional storytelling, the way the imagery and gameplay path—yes, the mechanics of the main character should and will always be a cornerstone—coexist to sneak under our skin. *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* casts its spell, defines its story, through the power of its imagery, and so can a video game.

I ponder this as I explore Nintendo's book of enchantment, *The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker*.

There is not one word of text in this Japanese Zelda I can understand, yet through the strength of the visuals and the immersion of Link's efforts to disarm his fairy tale conflict, I'm lost in the moment. Gaming has become a chance to tell an immersing story, paint a



"...it is still this grand level of gameplay that draws my final attention."

Because the world is a chain of islands, Link takes to the waters to harness the power of wind.





majestic mood, play to our wonder with visual fantasy. Zelda contains all these qualities, but demonstrates them in a way that elevates the artform. I have much more to discover in Zelda, yet I already see greatness—a purely traditional Zelda reimagined with the sophistications and newfound artistry of modern game design.

Zelda introduces a new world that could never exist but functions magically as a cherished fantasy. To call it an interactive cartoon seems too convenient, cheapening its intentions. The childlike wonder that bubbles through the game is a gentle beauty. The inhabitants of the land are peculiar, strange and wildly imaginative. There is an innocence and simplistic purity that endears them to our hearts like a warm, effortless smile.

And while I am so thrilled by my eye's treasures, it is still this grand level of gameplay that draws my final attention. Link possess all the core abilities he has had since Ocarina of Time, improved and enhanced. Items like the grappling hook take on new form, simply out of the amazing attention to physical details and enhanced animation. Enemies react with a captivating presence, demonstrating incredible movement and attention to subtle details. And the theme of a world driven by the forces of wind exists as an actual entity in itself, manipulating the ways of the land and Link's calculated progress.

Much attention has been paid to the more intricate qualities of the universe. Because of the advancement of technology, objects appear more alive and threatening, and the world just becomes more complete and fully immersing. Its uniquely expressive nature is not necessarily driven by technology. Faulting the game for any lack of polygons or the choice of a simple texture is moot, because the fact remains that we still can't build properly sophisticated models. What matters is how the craftsmen wield their tools. What matters is that I can enter a dungeon room in Zelda and delight in the impact of it all.

Shigeru Miyamoto and the game's director, Aonuma Eiji, emphasize how important it was for them to create a game that was not just revolutionary, but offered an experience and setting that draws no comparison. They've succeeded. Games like these come with one intent: to host your dreams. **play**



the legend of zelda: wind waker

system: gamecube / developer: nintendo / publisher: nintendo / available: march

preview



How a sequel is done right

DARK CLOUD 2

words brady fichter

Back in the dark ages of gaming, when 3D visuals pretty much sucked, a brief demo of Dark Cloud demonstrated the PlayStation 2's ability to show us pools of water like we'd never seen before. Our impressionable gaming minds believed that, "No, water can't possibly look any better than this!" It does; simply stare at Dark Cloud 2 for the proof.

But forget about that silly water: let's look at the countless other visual strokes of magic that bless this widely improved sequel—gorgeous use of color, rich textures, lovely fantasy aesthetics, wonderfully designed charac-

ters. The entire world in Dark Cloud 2 is so appealing to look at, so invitingly bright and carried by a classical sensibility, that you simply can't compare it to the first game.

Or many other games out there, for that matter. And the game plays so much better, stripping away the flaws of the random-dungeon nonsense and miscalculated town building feature; lots of improvements around every corner. In Dark Cloud 2, more traditional role-playing elements come into play, but by no means is this a turn-based, heavily story driven adventure. It's more

action-oriented and broadly contained, using a more cohesive, organically displayed universe to draw you into the plight of the characters. There is so much more life to the game, and when you are dropped into winding, twisting passages, they don't feel like typical drab dungeons despite their complex layout. I still haven't been able to embark on a complete, english-translated journey, but I'm hooked to the perils and sensational fantasy of it all already. Dark Cloud 2 will no doubt be the pleasant surprise in the genre this year. Here's to more on the way...



"...Dark Cloud 2 is so appealing to look at, so invitingly bright and carried by a classical sensibility..."



The game looks great, with an art style that captures the mood perfectly



dark cloud 2

developer: level-5 / publisher: sony / available: february

preview



Lamborghini

system: playstation 2/xbox/gamecube
developer: rage
publisher: tba
available: spring

The Lamborghini titles currently under development by Rage will be the only ones to feature the entire range of Lamborghini cars past and present, and has been developed with assistance from Lamborghini's chief designers and technicians. The game will allow the player to join the Lamborghini Millionaires Club, and race in a series of leagues set in exotic locations around the world.



RTX Red Rock

system: playstation 2/gamecube
developer: lucas arts
publisher: lucas arts
available: spring 2003

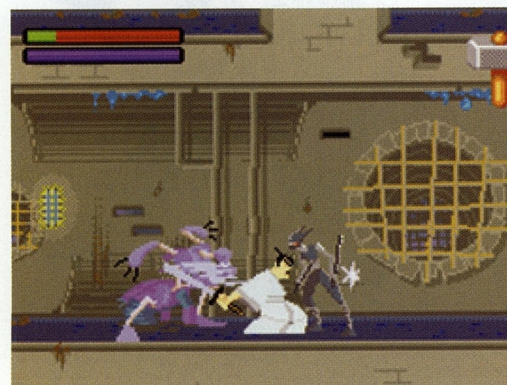
Radical Tactics Expert (RTX) Eugene Zero "E.Z." Wheeler, makes Max Steele look like a panty waste, as he's called in to save the day when mankind's first colony on Mars is besieged by a brutal alien force. Look for some hands on info in the March **play**.



Silent Hill 3

system: playstation 2
developer: konami
publisher: konami
available: q1

Silent Hill 3 is drawing near, and contains even deeper and darker secrets than the last. You'll find your wits tested, as you grapple with clever puzzles, foreboding environments, and mysterious new creatures; luckily you can now use anything in site to lunk the grossness off of them. Developed by the same team that created the first two games, Silent Hill 3 promises to be the most horrifying game ever created.



Samurai Jack

system: game boy advance
developer: virtucraft
publisher: bam! entertainment
available: feb 2003

We just missed sneaking in a review of Samurai Jack's Game Boy Advance debut, but the game looks as full of promise as the ultra-stylized material it's based on. As we join jack on a journey of honor and revenge through a futuristic world filled with wonders to help him rid the world of evil once and for all.

Ice Nine

system: playstation 2
 developer: torus games
 publisher: bam! entertainment
 available: june 2003

Ice Nine is the next evolution of stealth training. We could tell you more but we don't have the clearance... Actually, we don't have the game, just these rather impressive screen grabs. You know the drill: covert ops, CIA, neutralize this, cease that...coming soon.



Alter Echo

system: playstation 2/xbox/gamecube
 developer: outrage games
 publisher: thq
 available: spring 2003

We finally had a sit down with THQ's Alter Echo and came away intrigued to say the least. The game has a sort of Wild 9 look and feel and adopts several new systems—most notably TimeDilation, a combo system based on the keeping a beat, along with other traits akin to the great platformers of old, all in a strange surreal landscape unlike anything we've see on modern console. The lead character Nevin has a funny head, but we'll deal with that in our extended preview next issue.



Wallace & Gromit

system: ps2/xbox/gamecube/pc
 developer: frontier
 publisher: bam! entertainment
 available: october 2003

Wallace & Gromit has been molded into an arcade platform adventure where the player has to liberate the zoo from the evil clutches of the maniacal penguin Feathers, and is headed our way in the latter half of '03. This is big for Bam!



Skies of Arcadia Legends

system: gamecube
 developer: sonic team
 publisher: sega
 available: q1

Just around the corner, Skies of Arcadia is nearly ready for its second shot at the brass ring. Remixed for GameCube, it remains to be seen how much or how little Sonic Team has been able to improve the game's pace, which kept the Dreamcast version from aspiring to greatness. With a little luck, this could be the GC RPG we've been waiting for.





SpongeBob SquarePants: ROTFD

system: playstation 2
developer: big sky interactive
publisher: thq
available: now

Bikini Bottom isn't all its cracked up to be. I'd love to report that Bob's game debut is as much kooky fun as the show but that's not gonna happen, as long as I'm still able to look at a sponge in his ball huggers and remain sane. While the game trumpets the SpongeBob credo, it's the result of either rushed development, lack of experience, or a combination of both. Levels so sparse they should run at 60 sputter at 30, the models are bad, and there's loading where there should be none. Progression comes by way of Bob changing outfits to complete tasks (hey it's SpongeBob Hawk!) and then catching a bus to the next hub where he'll do much the same. Even a sponge deserves better.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●



Fighter Maker 2

system: playstation 2
developer: agetec
publisher: agetec
available: now

Fighting-game fans tend to be a passionate lot, fastidiously uncovering the finer points of their SFs and VFs. Playing these games is one thing, but making your own? The problem with the clumsily esoteric Fighter Maker 2 is that it is an editor more than it is an actual game: you get to create your own fighting game, manipulating moves, camera, control and other major areas of design, but the crude mechanics of the end result and the antiquated, bland look of the arena make it all a tedious exercise with zero payoff. Even if FM2 sounds like a unique opportunity to tool around with tons of options and live the fantasy of watching your ideas given game form, the technical hurdles of making the end result playable are nearly hopeless.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating ●●●●●



Evolution Snowboarding

system: playstation 2
developer: konami osaka
publisher: konami
available: now

Dark Summit was a good, bordering on great game. Imagining what Konami Osaka might do with a similar premise, applying a much darker edge to a future Earth and circumstances lethal enough to call in Roadrunner Records artists like Slipknot and Murderdolls, seemed beyond promising. Sadly, Evolution is full of missed opportunity; an almost in nearly every regard. A lack of polish, uninspired models, and no physics to speak of accent a game steeped in wicked themes, excellent slope wars, some great lighting effects, and of course a suitably crunching soundtrack. The game looks three years old but plays and sounds good enough to hang with, barely.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●

Shrek Extra Large

system: gamecube
developer: digital illusions
publisher: tdk
available: now

Anyone who grabbed their Xbox hot off the shelf was at least curious as to the merits of Shrek, due to either its zillion-dollar pedigree or the promise of bump mapping. The latter alone was worth the price of a game that underneath its gorgeous veneer seemed to hide a game that might not be so bad, were it not for horrible physics and awful collision detection. I wanted so to like that game and even more so to like this one. My thinking was that TDK held back on Extra Large to fix the bugs, knowing they wouldn't have bump mapping to fall back on. Much to my dismay, what we have here is a remix of sorts that's shockingly nearly as gorgeous but tragically just as bad, if not worse in exactly the same places—character physics and collision. Digital Illusions certainly know how to paint a pretty picture but when it comes to physics (kind of important) they rank at the very bottom of the heap, no, they actually tunnel under the heap; at least give Shrek's footsteps a sound effect. As for TDK, how can a company so formidable make the same mistake twice, over a year apart? Heads need to roll, unless of course, they're living in a fairy tale. This game could have been their happy ending—it's strangely addicting even with the botched physics.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●





Unreal Championship

system: xbox
developer: digital extremes
publisher: infogrames
available: now

A long time ago, Unreal Championship was supposed to make competitive little boys and girls very happy by delivering a platform of multiplayer death and mayhem available on Xbox. Then Xbox Live didn't come out, and we all got bummed. Now that's it out, we can't really celebrate, because it's not nearly as good and innovative as some of the stuff we're seeing now, but that doesn't mean this game doesn't have its moments of kickassness. Moment one: discovering a cool new weapon where you discharge a giant bubble of energy and blast it to rock everything in its path. Moment two: getting into the groove with your favorite massive weapon and shredding a handful of your attacking mates in a matter of seconds. Moment three: picking sides and joining your team for more strategic shootouts. Moment four: discovering that there is a respectable level of technique required in all the killing, learning to work with adrenaline boosts and characters of differing attributes. Moment five: discovering that the game seems to look better the more you get into its nice array of worlds.

And now the one thing that bothers me: the game needs some touching up, and the framerate kind of sucks. But so good are the multiplayer online battles—don't you dare buy this for solo action—that any of the game's undeniable deficiencies become quickly forgotten.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating ●●●●●



Die Hard Vendetta

system: gamecube
developer: bit studios
publisher: sierra
available: now

Crude language and inane one liners are the order of the day in Die Hard Vendetta, an average first-person shooter with the only real ambition to counterbalance all the manic action of the genre with an uncommon amount of character dialogue and interaction. It's a smart approach to shaking things up a bit, but it's handled so limply that I wanted nothing but action. And the more I blew stuff up with Mr. McClane's unimpactful weapons, the more I had to deal with uneventful level design and poor AI, the more I wanted to talk to people.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating ●●●●●

Whiteout

system: playstation 2
developer: vicarious visions
publisher: konami
available: now

Whiteout is as boring and mundane a steering exercise as you will ever find. On the surface, burning hoops and all (Freestyle anyone?). Whiteout seems okay, but upon further inspection it's simply a yawn to play. Flat, elderly announcers call races devoid of any physics, and there's no feeling of snow or play mechanics to speak of in a game so below board it advertises its mode selection during loading screens. Sure, you get some nice weather effects, (actually very nice) but any sense of connecting with the terrain is fleeting at best. The models are mediocre, the animation quick and dirty, and the graphics, old news. Snocross has yet to generate a good game.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●

Hot Wheels Velocity X

system: playstation 2
developer: beyond games
publisher: thq
available: now

You are Max Justice, racing to reveal clues to the whereabouts of the heinous individual attempting to heist the formula for Velocity X. Once you disregard the setup, it's off to the amatish races. All the staples are here: tons of cars, lots of tracks, different modes, an array of gadgets. Because you're powered by Hot Wheels, the courses wind, twist loop and turn, opening a path for wild stunts. Well, not wild, really, as much as the same couple of tricks over and over. Most your time is spent in the adventure mode, where various challenges are made even more of an ordeal when fumbling with a car that offers no distinct feel other than stiff. I like the idea behind this game well enough, but the generic packaging leaves it stalled.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating ●●●●●

play anime



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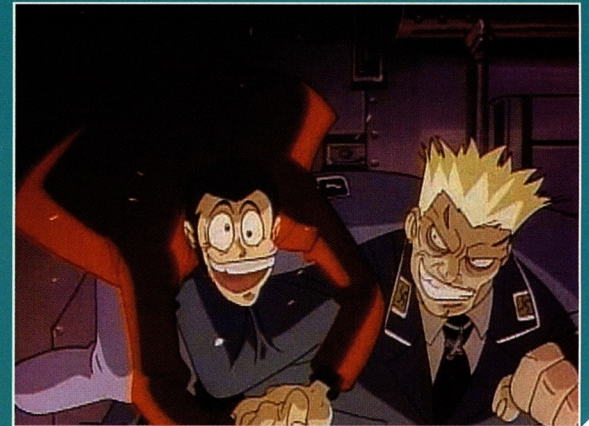


Japan's master thief has his day in the sun

FUN WITH LUPIN

words dave halverson

America, meet Lupin; Lupin, America. Sure, most people know who Lupin is and everyone's seen or heard about *Castle Cagliostro*, but Japan's master thief is about to make a tsunami-sized splash on the US anime scene with three re-mastered movies from Funimation and the TV episodes, coming by way of Pioneer. For the uninitiated, *Lupin* is the template from which *Bond*, *Indiana Jones*, and anything that vaguely resembles any amalgamation thereof were conceived; everybody copied *Lupin*.



Aided by his faithful crew—Jigen, ex-American mafia, super cool, always smoking a cig, always dressed to the nines and number one with a gun; Goemon, a master samurai who's always in the right place at the right time and possesses a sword so case-hardened that it can chop through any substance on the planet; and Fujiko, a shapely sexy master thief that plays frisky with Lupin when it serves her and is motivated by pretty much one thing: show her the money. Hot on Lupin's tail is Zenigata, Interpol's bumbling top cop assigned to take Lupin down at all costs. Of course, he's been at it so long and failed on so many occasions, his budget now consists of either red or blue-label ramen, hot water not included. Lupin's hook is that he's a thief who only robs from scumbags and or megalomaniacs, and he always leads the police to their door, since Zenigata is never far behind. Lupin's also in it for the chicks, although he rarely gets any. And there you have it, a recipe for exotic locales, hot steamy sexual innuendo, action, adventure, stuff blowing up, and everything that goes with it.

What makes Lupin so irresistible, especially in his films, are Monkey Punch's original designs and the stories. Witty repartee, smart writing, ingenious plot structure, and high production values are the cornerstone of this franchise. Lupin isn't just cool, he owns cool.

Funimation has three movies for your viewing pleasure, all of which are pretty special in their own right, beginning with my second favorite, *Harimao's Treasure*. Harimao was the Robin Hood of WWII. He stole everything that he could get his hands on from both sides of the fence and when he died, gave each of his three most trusted comrades one

of three statues that would unlock the vast riches he stowed away, worth some 800 billion pounds. About the time Lupin gets wind of the treasure one of those trusted comrades, Sir Archer, owner of the largest insurance empire in the world, Lloyds of London, meets with a claim not even he can cover, prompting him to seek out the treasure to keep from bankruptcy. Lucky for us, a cross-dressing Nazi, Herr Mafroditte, is also after the treasure (and oh what a plot twist he has in store), along with his resident thug Goering. Every *Lupin* has resident thugs, but these two take the cake. Harimao's is a slick production and contains one of the better *Lupin* dubs.

I can't say the same for *The Secret of Twilight Gemini*, the most dated looking of the three, although its story has more heart than the usual *Lupin* shallows, and it's laced with uncharacteristically revealing sexual content. Don't expect to see Fujiko naked ever again, let alone in the sack with Lupin. A collector's episode if there ever was one.

The cream of this *Lupin* crop, however, is *Dragon of Doom*, which contains among other things some of the best ninja fighting animation you'll ever see. In *Dragon*, Lupin goes after a treasure being sought by mafia kingpin Chin Chin Chow—the Dragon Scroll, which has implications dating back to the roots of Goemon's clan. The hitch here is that the scroll is lying at the bottom of the sea...on the Titanic! *Dragon*'s the most we ever see of the mysterious Goemon, and has some of the best animation this side of that famous castle.

lupin the 3rd: harimao's treasure

rating: 13+ / running time: 100 min.

play rating ●●●●●

lupin the 3rd: the secret of twilight gemini

rating: 13+ / running time: 100 min.

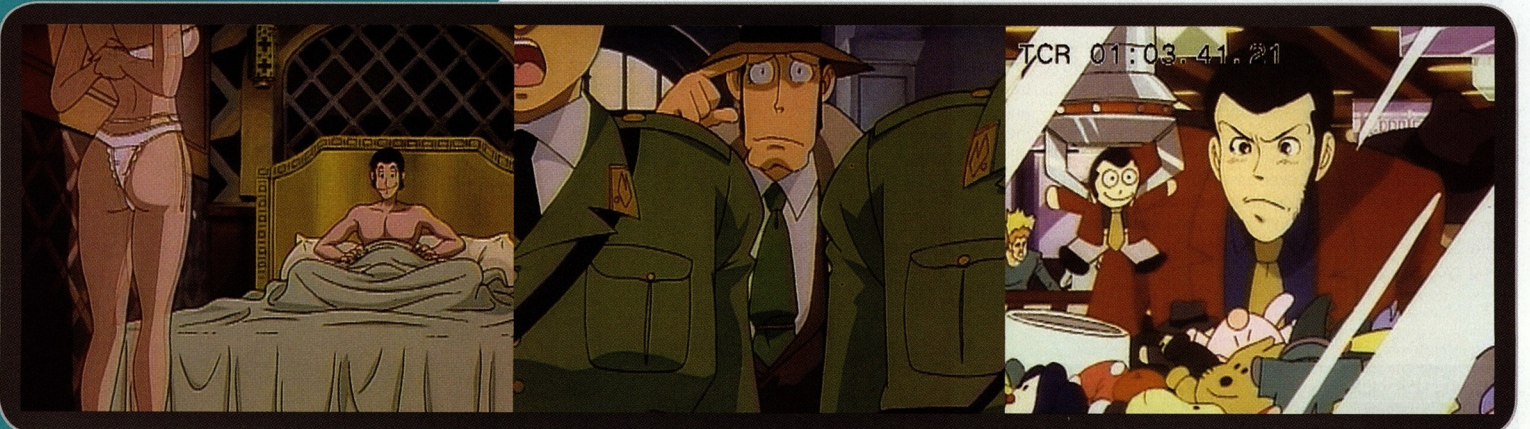
play rating ●●●●●

lupin the 3rd: dragon of doom

rating: 15+ / running time: 100 min.

play rating ●●●●●

"Lucky for us a cross-dressing Nazi, Herr Mafroditte, is also after the treasure."

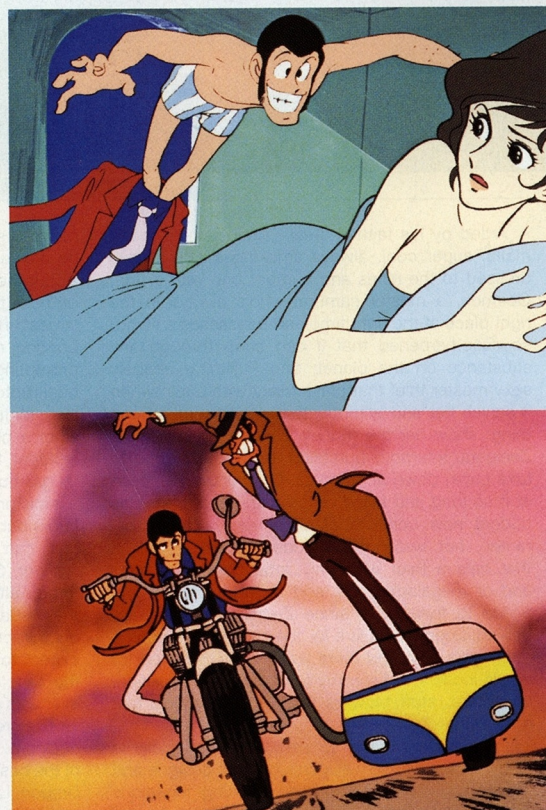


Put your daughters to bed—Lupin TV is on

LUPIN THE 3RD

WORLD'S MOST WANTED

words dave halverson



"Of course, the ship is rigged with more traps than Jennifer Love Hewitt's Underoos."

There's the movie Lupin—cool suave, chick magnet (well, on a good day); and then there's the TV Lupin, who's more of a bumbling happy-go-lucky master thief blessed with dumb luck. Depending on the vintage, what you get teeters between wacky or smooth, although both go down nicely. In this case, we get a little bit of both. The magic of *Lupin* really shines through in these TV episodes, evidenced by how quickly their dated look fades away. The quality writing and impressive homegrown animation combined with the greatest anime caper cast ever assembled makes for a nostalgic and enlightening trip down memory lane.

In the first episode, Lupin, Jigen, Goemon, and Fujiko all are lured onto a luxury liner by a maniac-racing tycoon who's been out for revenge since Lupin

trashed his raceway many years prior. The old coot's had his body bionically upgraded (now he's bald, green, and really strong) and dedicated his life to the end of Lupin's. Of course the ship is rigged with more traps than Jennifer Love Hewitt's Underoos, and fun for anyone in the family over the age of 13 ensues. Next up Lupin plans to hold up a soccer championship in Rio and uses a certain landmark to his advantage. Oh, the joys of antiquated anime; you'd never get away with this stuff today. All five of these episodes are treasures that showcase the roots of one of the most beloved anime icons ever and Pioneer's done a formidable job transferring the contents to DVD. Between the movies and the TV series it's impossible to make a call, you have to go both ways.



lupin the 3rd vol.1 - world's most wanted

studio: pioneer entertainment / rating: 13 & up / running time: 150 minutes

play rating ●●●●●

Two assassins in
search of the past.

To hear their name
is to know fear;

To see their face
is to know death.

NOIR

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Now this is living

ARJUNA

words dave halverson

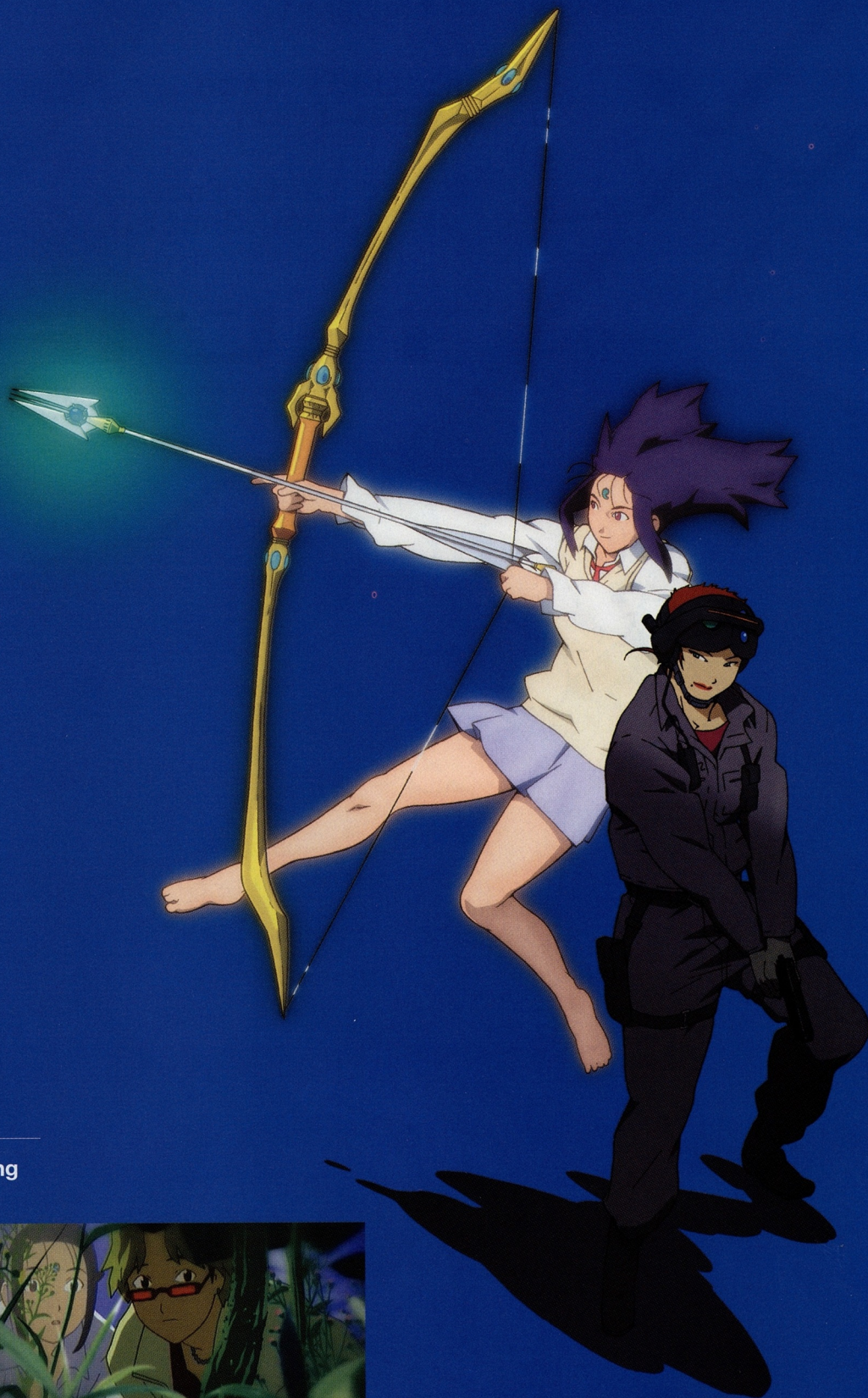
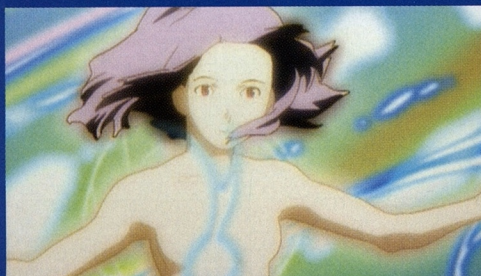
The creator of *Macross Plus* and *Escaflowne*, Shoji Kawamori, has something to say. PETA members should see *Arjuna* because it will give them renewed vigor to forge ahead; every member of our Government should see *Arjuna* because it will remind them that there's still a big picture to think about; and you should see *Arjuna* because not only is it one of the most beautiful anime ever produced but a wake-up call we all need to heed. We're so busy gassing up our cars, artificially growing our food, and loading batteries into our gizmos that we don't ever stop to think about the most important thing in the universe—life.

Arjuna is about the repercussions of our abuse of the planet presented so eloquently it's a wonder it's only an anime. A tiny niche in the scheme of things given its breadth, *Arjuna* should interrupt the six o'clock news or be the next big thing coming to HBO, but it's not. You on the other hand are reading this, so no excuses.

Arjuna is about a girl, Juna, who dies. On her way to the next life she is rocked by visions of the planet Earth dying like a harpooned whale floating in space, and is offered the chance to live again if she will dedicate her life to protecting it. Unable to fully comprehend the significance of such a plight, she of course agrees, and jumps out of her deathbed reborn. Since, Juna has been on a journey of awakening—she can see things, like transmigration, and the individual layers of life in innate objects. She also possesses super hero-like powers played out on a parallel plain of reality, and has telekinetic ability beyond the human realm. She's mainlined directly into the cycle of life: heavy doo-doo. Imagine eating a fast food burger and seeing the vile artificially raised cow it came from living there in its own feces. That's a tough pill to swallow, but that's where *Arjuna*'s at in her plight as the avatar of time.

Arjuna is educational (in a good way, I swear; I know that's a death nil), completely captivating, and set to beautiful music, but at the same time it's hard-core anime, as edgy and wonderful as *FLCL*, or *SoulTaker*, or *Eva* or any other profound show. Moreover, visually, it's the picture of new techniques in animation with cel shading, cgi, traditional animation, and real life footage melded together to staggering effect. *Arjuna* is a work of genius.

“...rocked by visions of the planet Earth dying like a harpooned whale...”



arjuna vol.2

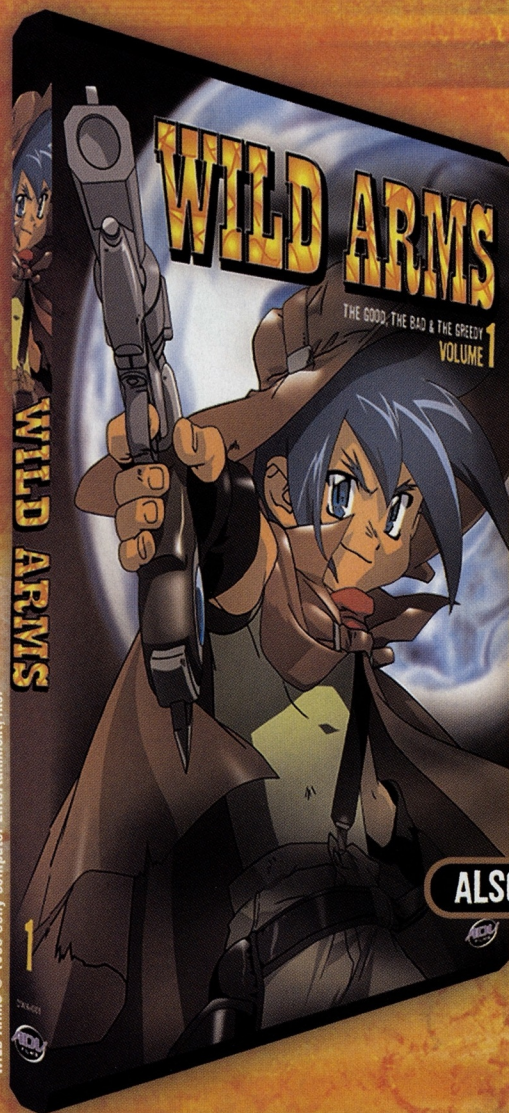
studio: bandai entertainment / rating: 13 & up / running time: 100 minutes

play rating ●●●●●

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DEVIL LADY

words dave halverson

To be completely honest I've never been all-that impressed with anime created by manga maestro Go Nagai. But *Devil Lady*, this is one nice piece of work. Creating horror of the animated kind with any semblance of tension is a tall order, but *Devil Lady* nails it, to the cross. When we first meet her, Jun Fudou's a high-fashion model at the top of her game with life all buttoned up nice and tight... Until she meets with the irresistible charms of Lan Asuka, head of the Human Alliance of Beast Hunters, who introduces Jun to a side of herself she never knew existed. Lead to a remote where house and left alone in the dark, Jun is confused but somehow composed. The man in chains across from her appears to be a thug of sorts, until he gets a whiff of her and begins to swell, slowly transforming into a hungry, slobbering werewolf—and his tongue only has eyes for her. About now Jun should call on her inner demon and slay the beast, at least that's what we've come to expect. In this case, however, the beast gets to skewer her in human form (blood sprays, parts stretch) and bring her to near death before we get to see Jun's maiden transformation, which proves to be more lethal than anyone bargained for, especially Gene Simmons. It's clear from this point forward that Jun's partial evolution will become the bane of her existence as she struggles to hold on to her human soul—a pawn stuck between the life she once knew and her new role as traitorous beast killer and human protector. In between, the beasts and the Alliance hold her in check by playing Russian roulette with her human friends, making for one bloody game of cat and mouse. Aside from the obvious throws of demonic anime, (the sex and violence we so adore) it's the way in which this particular story unfolds that captivates the viewer. After volume one I'm not even convinced the humans are the good guys, but I do know that I'm into *Devil Lady* for the long haul.



"...a pawn stuck between the life she once knew and her new role as traitorous beast killer and human protector."



devil lady vol.1 - the awakening

studio: adv films / rating: 17 & up / running time: 100 minutes

play rating ●●●●●

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DESCENDANTS OF darkness

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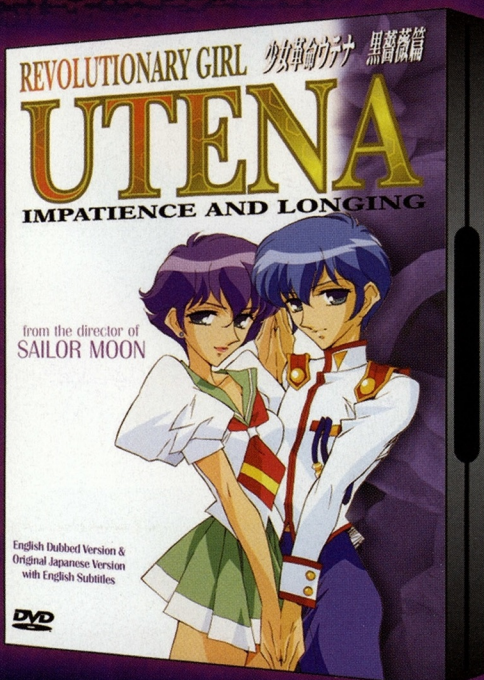
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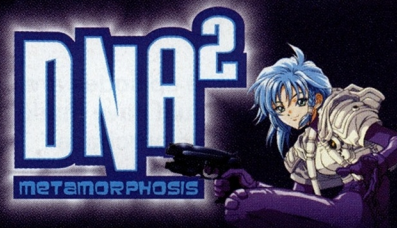
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3-2-1, let's go

COWBOY BEBOP

BEST SESSIONS



words christina alexander

“You’ve got to see this!” a former co-worker of mine was yelling while hurrying into the office waving a VHS tape around like a madman. “As soon as we take lunch break, you’ve got to see this!” The rest of us looked at him oddly, but agreed to see what the big hullabaloo was about. Come 1:15 P.M., six other anime nuts and I were huddled around a small contraband TV in a tiny dark conference room at 3DO Company headquarters. From the stylistic jazz/swing/big band opening credits we oohed, aaahed, and cheered our way to addiction. Memories. Don’t we all remember where we were the first time we saw *Cowboy Bebop*?

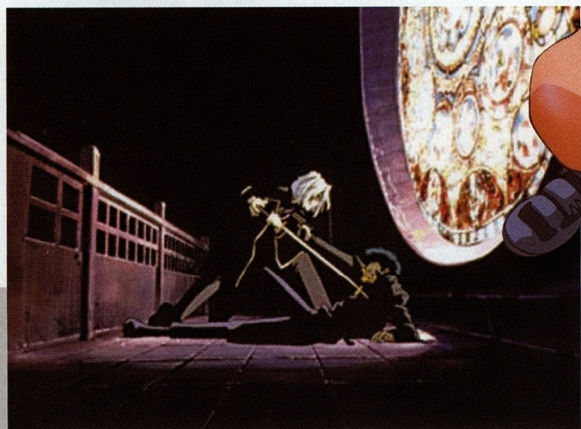
Taking the anime world forcefully by storm, *CB* was the only anime to actually rival *Neon Genesis Evangelion* in popularity. *Bebop* was standing in the lofty ranks among such universally loved titles like *Ninja Scroll* and *NG Eva*—shows that were adored even by those who don’t like anime. *Cowboy Bebop* was brilliant.

So what could be the problem with releasing more of it to fans? Well it’s the “more of it” part that’s the problem, as *Sessions* offers little in the way of new content.

Best Sessions consists of two discs packaged in a wonderfully vague but artsy cover containing three episodes each—a total of six re-edited episodes that are considered to be the cream of the crop. That’s it. No extras either. Unless you consider Bandai trailers, and a reversible DVD slipcover extras.

Without any exclusive bonuses (like outtakes or interviews), there really isn’t much to recommend about *Best Sessions* unless you’re after owning it for owning its sake (collector). Even if you haven’t seen *Bebop*, these episodes start in the middle of the series—hardly the best place to start.

“While the episodes are pure genius, exclusive extras would have made *Best Sessions* a worthwhile purchase.”



cowboy bebop: best sessions

studio: bandai entertainment / rating: 13 & up / running time: 180 minutes

play rating ●●●●●

THE BEAUTY IDOL PROJECT

In a world ruled by idols, Yuri rose to the top. Her charm unified the world, and she became the elected President. Upon her retirement, she chose six Excellent Idols as her successors. Mimu is a high school girl who wants nothing more than to be like Yuri, and sing in Crystal Hall. Her dream brings her together with the six Excellent Idols, and they embark on a quest into the Tropical Dimension. This world is in peril, and it can only be saved by swimsuit contests, obstacle courses, mud wrestling and, of course, idol singing!



Idol Project 1: Starland Festival

Street: 2/25/03 AWDVD-0302 \$19.95srp

58 Minutes Contains OVA Episodes 1-2

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THE BEAST IRON VIRGIN JUN

In the Asuka family, nothing is more important than time honored tradition. For their lovely young daughter Jun, it means she must get married on her 18th birthday. Although poor little virgin Jun is not above kickin' butt, she just can't stand the thought of marrying someone she doesn't love. Her mother sends out a gang of bloodthirsty goons to drag her to the altar, but Jun would rather beat a hundred suitors into one big, bloody mess than get married on her mother's terms, and she's about to prove it.

Iron Virgin Jun

Street: 1/28/03 AWDVD-0241 \$17.95srp

45 Minutes

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Year in Review

A look back at some of the year's best DVDs

Ice Age

20th Century Fox / PG

Since the novelty of CG movies wore off it's taken a little more than technology to prod me into the cinema, let alone to buy a DVD, even one as chock full of bonus features as this. A given performance in the virtual realm is as much in the hands of the artisans as the actors. Star power alone isn't enough to bank these zillion dollar epics on, especially seeing how they span many years of painstaking work to assemble. As such, my love for them is deep and my admiration towards their benefactors, heartfelt.

At the heart of this fable lies a simple plot that can only work if the animation and human elements gel, which is difficult given the notoriety of three such prominent actors. *Ice Age* takes all of 10 minutes to draw you into its serene grasp, and Scrat... well Scrat is my vote for best actor this year. *Ice Age* truly is palatable for kids or adults, leaning more towards adults. A lot of kiddie fare claims as much, but *Ice Age* backs it up with witty repartee, and just enough strife to keep you caring. With *Shrek* and now this, this relatively young art form seems to be in wonderful hands.

**Star Wars Episode 2: Attack of the Clones**

20th Century Fox / PG

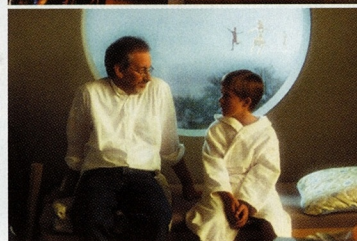
As much as George Lucas insisted that he was neither interested nor bothered by the criticisms of *The Phantom Menace*, there certainly seemed to be evidence of a great desire to atone for his sins with *Attack of the Clones*, and he pulled it off. Through sheer brute force of visual imagination and stunning effects sequences, this film stands as one of the great spectacles of all time. Sure, the characters don't possess half the charm of those in the original trilogy and seem more like plot machinations than real people, but there is enough nostalgic resonance to easily carry the film. And it goes without saying that the DVD transfer looks superb and is loaded with ridiculous amounts of supplemental materials.

**Artificial Intelligence: A.I.**

Warner Bros. / PG-13

Stanley Kubrick had been floating ideas on *A.I.* for years, involving even audience-friendly Steven Spielberg into his domain of brilliant eccentricity, hoping that the stalwart director would join him in realizing his vision. After Kubrick's sudden death, the

project was accelerated into production by the lone Spielberg, which led more than a few critics to quickly point out that *A.I.* was obviously a mishmash of two disparate styles. There are indeed a few moments, especially during the Flesh Fair scene, where the film strains under Spielberg's frothy touch, revealing tonal cracks that would have perhaps been better smoothed over by Kubrick. No matter: *A.I.* intrigues and mesmerizes while it confounds and frustrates, towering over most sci-fi with its visionary extensions. The idea of a manufactured boy struggling with its place in a very complex world is nothing provocatively new, and unfortunately *A.I.* cops out when it comes to intensively challenging us, but it's the look of the film that finally gives it soaring flight. Most viewers shut down during the deliriously beautiful third act, a transfixing visual poem so abstract and unconventional that it was lazily interpreted as disjointed and soporific. In this distant-future Earth where evolved mechas are the only remaining inhabitants, I saw nothing but rapturous, meditative science fiction.

**Insomnia**

Warner Bros. / R

Aided by the luxury of a big budget production and a searing cast, Christopher Nolan delivered his first movie after the indie gem *Memento* in fine atmospheric form. *Insomnia* follows an atypically creepy Robin Williams as he attempts to avoid

Al Pacino's tortured cop, who himself is running from a crumbling cover-up—the scene in question devastates, spreading an even more unsettling pallor over the film. When Pacino's guilt rises to boiling and Williams reveals the end depths of his darkness, *Insomnia* reaches for a poignant conclusion, yet it's the palpable torture and crushing beauty of Alaska caught in perpetual sunrise that crawls under your skin.

**Moulin Rouge!**

20th Century Fox / PG-13

Moulin Rouge embraces wild exuberance and operatic excess to such a feverish degree that even the most audacious DVDs of the year seem boringly subdued in comparison. Not everyone will be able to escape into the romantics of the glitz and flash. The movie plays like an MTV video cut to drive you apoplectic, and it works so well that you can't imagine it any other way.

The hollywood musical is all but dead, which is yet another reason that *Moulin Rouge* is such an exciting breath of fresh air. Its melodrama and manic pitch are its treasure, continually rising and falling in culminating song numbers that take the likes of Madonna's "Like a Virgin" and Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" into bizarre, uncharacteristic territory.

The film stars Nicole Kidman as Satine, a showcase dancer at the high-brow men's club, the Moulin Rouge. The charming

Ewan McGregor, a writer who searches hopelessly for love, endears himself to her in a hilarious bedroom scene that ends, like all key scenes in the film, in colorful song and dance. Most the actors actually possess likable, competent voices, but the circus atmosphere and crazy energy are what ultimately steal the show. *Moulin Rouge* is an example of what can happen when a director flies from the typical, acceptable norm and discovers the many unique riches of the big screen.



Mulholland Drive Universal / R

Just when you think you've broken down David Lynch's impenetrable *Mulholland Drive*, the fortress walls of confusion just extend higher. This strange mood piece contains no sensible, conventional structure, twisting and winding through a nightmare of amnesia, oddly metaphorical sexuality, freaky confrontations and bizarre circumstances. The characters seem to be living in a dream world, abiding by

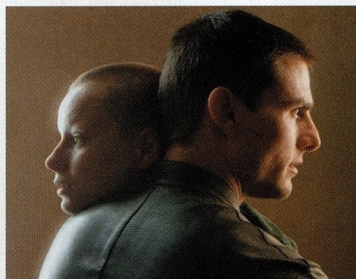
the conventions of a disparate, fractured mind; a film like this works its spell only the moment you give in to its schizophrenic form. Characters interact with an air of detachment, speaking with a surreal, trancelike impact. Everyone seems to be searching for something yet understands nothing, straining, like the viewer, for the answers to mysterious, unsettling questions. Lynch's insistence to bypass digestible filmmaking for his uniquely individual moroseness has never paid off so well as in *Mulholland Drive*.



Minority Report 20th Century Fox / PG-13

Steven Spielberg was in his freest, most exuberant form during his Indiana Jones days. *Minority Report* returns to this pure spirit with scenes of wild energy and grand audience-pleasing shine. Part of what makes this great filmmaking is its deft mixing of big ideas and fantastic spectacle—science fiction as dramatic as it is exciting to look at. Grounded in modern-day references underpinned by visions of what we might see in a convincing future, *Minority Report* shows us a society where virtual advertising pops up every step you take and cars ride railways that wind and twist up buildings and through impossibly complicated networks of towering buildings. Crime proliferates, but in Washington, murder is practically nonexistent, thanks to a new prevention unit that can capture

visions of a killer before he actually commits the act. It's an intriguing setup that never fully pays off, but the rush of seeing Spielberg toss us one spectacular scene after another is science fiction at its best.



The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship... New Line Cinema / PG-13

How can the power of the director's cut of *Lord of the Rings* possibly be denied? Even on the small screen, the immense beauty and savage chaos transmits its intoxicating magic. For all its simplicity, the underpinning of good and evil, of greed and rageful desire plays perfectly alongside the sensational pageantry. Of course, the real impact here is the gift of Peter Jackson's additional footage that was left on the cutting room floor. The movie plays long and takes its time with scenes that could be seen for bombast, but the richness of Tolkien's original work receives more proper attention. Occasional flaws aside, *Lord of the Rings* is delirious fantasy that no fan of film should be without.



E.T. The Extraterrestrial Universal / PG

If you're of a certain age, it might be nearly impossible to objectively view *E.T.*, so strong will be the nostalgic warmth of this film. But try, and you'll find an incredibly moving and surprisingly surreal film that above all else showcases the energized genius of early Spielberg. His incredible idea was not to make a children's film, but simply one told from the perspective of a child. The end result was a film of heart-aching power, first putting you into the open mind of child, and then confronting that child with the most astounding discovery that any human could ever hope to make. Those who call the film overly sentimental simply have no heart.



artificial

but not intelligent

tony hawk action figures

Tony Hawk is now officially everywhere he can possibly be, short of space, which we're betting he's thinking about building a skate park in. ArtAsylum (makers "N" The Box, among other fine toys) is on deck for the action figures and if you ask us, these prototypes are looking quite all right. The end product will include many points of articulation, the great sculpts shown here, and real-time scabbing when you drop them... well, no, but that would be cool. For a closer look, check out Tony and friends at artasylum.com, or over at Tony's at tonyhawk.com.



tony hawk minimates

Small, cool, and articulated with 12 points of movement, MiniMates represent a new era in action figures — namely short freakish ones. Each toy comes packaged with a puzzle base for you to connect and create an army of MiniMates, if, say, you need to invade some other toy faction besieging the house, or just live at the White House. MiniMates are usually fashioned around older toy trends, although where ArtAsylum's concerned pop-culture on the whole is pretty much fair game as evidenced by the mini shreddifiers strewn about this page looking like Tony Hawk if he were a Christmas tree ornament.

gear



Tabletop plasma display
Sony KE-32TS2

Plasma sets are finally starting to reach almost affordable levels, as Sony's new KE-32TS2 demonstrates. Coming in at just under \$5000, it's about half the price that similar sets were just over two years ago. But cheaper doesn't mean not as good, as image quality has steadily improved as prices have come down.

Early plasma sets suffered from poor black levels and color rendition, as well as being susceptible to image

burn-in. But the latest plasma technology goes some way to correcting these ills. This Sony uses the so-called ALIS panel (Alternate Lighting of Surfaces), which basically allows more phosphorescent material to shine through the display, allowing for a clearer, and brighter image with a much better black level response.

Sony's set also boasts the new DVI interface, for digitally connecting future HDTV receivers (and pass-

ing along copy protection information as well). For the analog crowd, the set features standard, high bandwidth component inputs, meaning that you can play Xbox and Gamecube games in all their progressive scan glory. Just be weary of burn-in. They haven't quite licked that yet.

www.sony.com
\$4999

Pocket digital still camera+
Casio EX-M5 2



There's nothing quite so cool as a really small camera, and Casio's new Exilim models are some of the smallest full-featured digital cameras yet. Coming in two flavors, the EX-S2 is straightforward digi-cam with 2.0 megapixel resolution and 30 second video clip capture. The EX-M2 is cosmetically similar, but adds MP3 playback, voice recording and movie capture with sound.

www.casio.com
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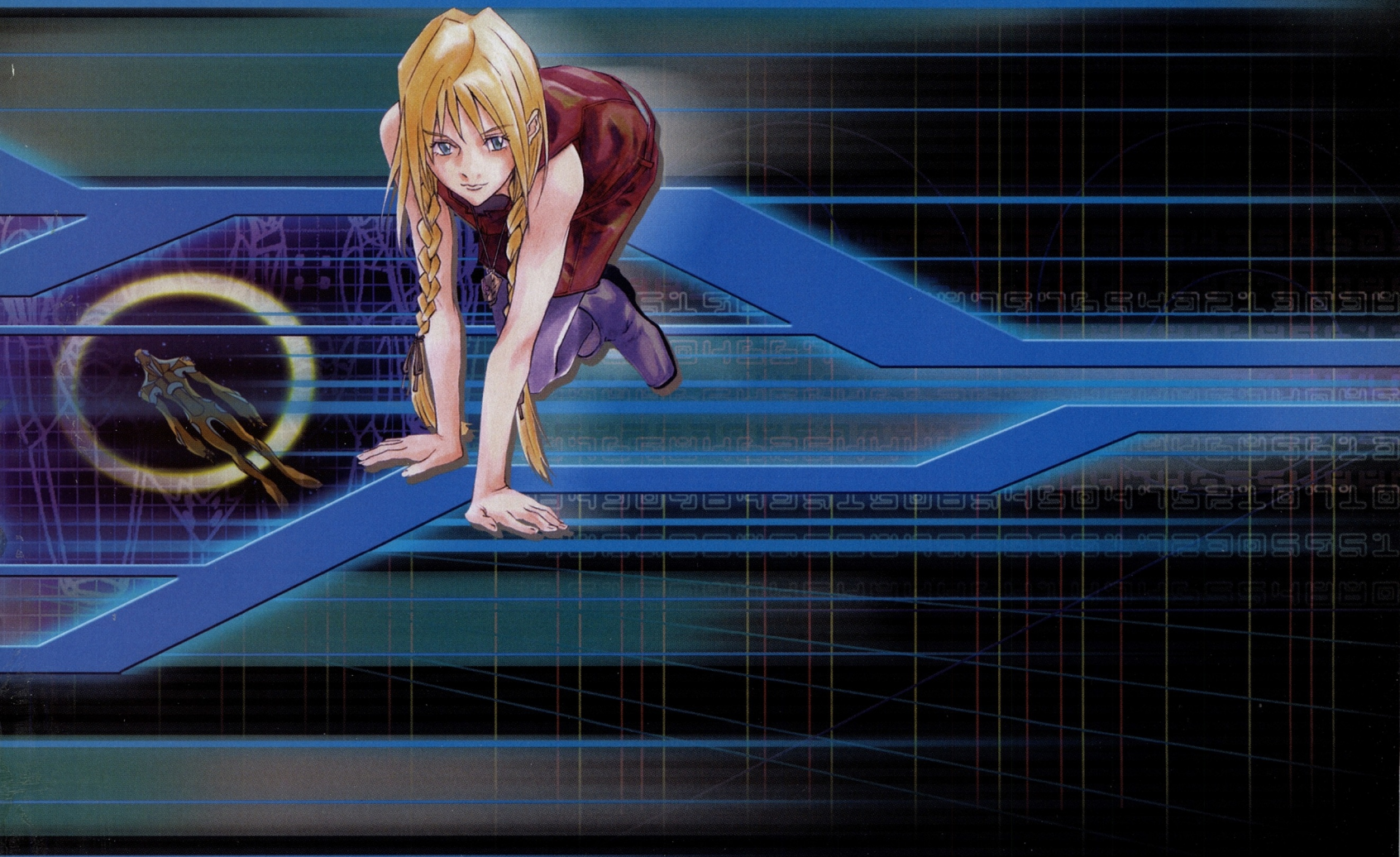
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